

Science and Chivalry: The Cultural Syncretism of Southern Intercollegiate Football, 1892-1910

Andy Doyle
Emory University

The immense popularity of intercollegiate football among the Northeastern elite during the late nineteenth century was due in part to an allegorical plasticity that enabled it to represent powerful currents of both modernism and antimodernism. Walter Camp's vision of football as a "scientific" sport that inculcated the values and skills necessary to the industrial era appealed to those who prospered under this new economic order. Yet the cultural text of college football also possessed strong elements of antimodernism that assuaged the anxieties of an elite concerned with the loss of masculine vitality in a culture of consumption. The martial values and rough masculinity that football was believed to foster were a therapeutic response to the enervating life of ease and luxury that was the inherent pitfall of great wealth. Southerners who adopted football in the early 1890s willingly accepted this allegorical duality, but they moulded their interpretation of the game to meet the special needs of a tradition-minded society undergoing a fundamental social and economic transformation.

Southern football was strongly linked with the New South drive to promote industrialization, urbanization, and sectional reconciliation on northern terms.

Southern modernizers intoxicated with a glittering vision of the moral and material progress of industrial capitalism were the region's most eager football boosters. They thus tended to promote Camp's vision of football as a model of the complexity, precision, and well-ordered dynamism of the machine age. Bringing a nationally popular mass market spectator sport to the South was akin to shouting from the hilltops that the region had taken a major step toward "big league" status. Attending a football game enabled the more cosmopolitan members of the southern bourgeoisie to feel connected to the national culture and to partake in the same fashionable leisure activities as the Northeast elite they so desperately sought to emulate.

While the dominant southern interpretation of football minimized the antimodern motif, all but the most ardent of New South boosters needed reassuring demonstrations of southern cultural legitimacy before he could truly embrace the new game. While the essence of the game was widely deemed to be a reflection of the values of a modern urban, industrial society, a kind of premodern window dressing was added to make the game more palatable to southerners who might otherwise resist this unfamiliar new sport. The personal combat of the gridiron thus became a modern incarnation of the southern martial tradition. Fans embraced their heroes as warriors defending the sacred honor of the homeland, and they sang "Dixie" and whooped Rebel Yells at games. Southerners also borrowed elaborate gender rituals from the romantic novels they were so fond of. Young society women served as team sponsors, acting out the role of the damsel of the medieval ring and lance tournament. These beautiful and elegantly dressed young women rode up to the center of the field in elaborately decorated horse-drawn carriages just prior to the opening kickoff and bestowed a ceremonial benediction on their team. The sponsorship rituals and the allusions to medieval combat and the Lost Cause added a pre-modern romanticism to a mass market leisure activity invented by Ivy Leaguers, brought south by Yankee coaches, and promoted by New South boosters. These elements of antimodernism linked a rationalized, autotelic sport with the Cavalier tradition and imparted a sense of historical continuity to a fundamentally new cultural form.

This Paper examines the interplay between the modern and premodern sporting elements in intercollegiate football in the Deep South from 1892 until 1910, and will focus primarily on Auburn University. The inaugural Deep South game between Auburn and the University of Georgia in Atlanta in February, 1892 will be a particular focus due to the high profile public discourse that accompanied the game. The Atlanta newspapers (especially the Constitution, which had a fifty percent financial interest in the game) made a concerted effort to promote and define this exotic and unfamiliar sport. These journalists articulated an ideological justification for football that defined it as both a symbol of and a vehicle for promoting progress and modernity. The southern religious press offered an ideological counterpoint to these football boosters, vehemently denouncing football because they regarded it as both impious and

alien to southern traditions and norms. In addition to this heated public discourse, Auburn's first football coach was a historian whose personal papers convey a detailed record of Auburn's first season. This paper will contain additional evidence from the next two decades, as southerners refined their conceptions of the ideological, social, and cultural benefits that they believed could be derived from football.