

# ***The Public Is All But Intoxicated on Football: Spright Dowell and the Politics of Football at Auburn, 1920-27***

Andy Doyle  
Auburn University, AL

Spright Dowell assumed the Presidency of Alabama Polytechnic Institute (commonly known as Auburn) in 1920 determined to transform Alabama's chronically impoverished land grant college into a modern university. Dowell worked energetically for over seven years to upgrade everything from the quality of instruction to the physical plant. He zealously hectored the notoriously parsimonious Alabama Legislature for increased funding, and raised over half a million dollars in a public subscription campaign when state appropriations proved inadequate. He raised admission standards, dramatically improved the professional qualifications of the faculty, and created an administrative bureaucracy to handle such everyday functions as student registration and bill paying. Enrolment increased over 60 percent during his seven year tenure, and he supervised the financing and construction of nearly two dozen campus buildings. Yet Dowell's antagonism toward big-time intercollegiate football and the precipitous decline of the Auburn football program created an explosive political controversy that plagued his administration and ultimately led to his dismissal in 1927.

Dowell was typical in many ways of the southern business progressives of the 1920s who belatedly introduced "the gospel of efficiency" to public and private institutions in the South. Yet Dowell disagreed sharply with most of his peers in the southern progressive elite over the issue of intercollegiate football. Most southern business leaders, politicians, and college administrators saw football as a symbol of progress and modernity. Since the introduction of football to southern campuses in the 1890s, southern progressives had generally viewed it as both a fashionable aspect of mainstream popular culture and as a reflection of the Machine Age virtues of competitiveness and highly coordinated teamwork under a hierarchical command structure. By the 1920s, they became increasingly enamoured with the public relations value of a successful football program. They believed, with some justification, that football victories increased enrolments, built political support for chronically underfunded state colleges and universities, and created a favorable image of the South in the rest of the nation. George Denny, the president of the University of Alabama during Dowell's tenure at Auburn, made the creation of a powerhouse football program the symbolic centerpiece of his ambitious plan to expand and modernize his institution. Conversely, Dowell's image as a progressive was severely weakened due to his refusal to embrace football.

Spright Dowell was one of the few southern progressives who saw the benefits derived from a winning football program as the fruits of a Faustian bargain that forced universities to sacrifice academic integrity on the altar of athletic success. Dowell refused to provide the football program with the funding increases it needed to remain competitive, he insisted that football players meet normal academic standards, and he refused to give football players preferential treatment in the distribution of scholarships and campus jobs. Auburn's football program was among the best in the South when Dowell assumed office, but seven years later, it was one of the worst.

Dowell's progressive ideology was informed by a deeply moralistic piety which was out of step with the permissive spirit of the Jazz Age. He was horrified by the drinking and gambling that inevitably accompanied football games, and in 1927, he expelled Auburn's star quarterback for drunkenness. The once-powerful Auburn team did not win a single game that year, which sparked an impassioned student protest movement against Dowell. A predominantly urban faction of Auburn alumni, which was headed by a leading Birmingham industrialist, joined the student rebels and pressured Governor Bibb Graves to oust Dowell. These urban alumni were strong football boosters, but they were also angry over Dowell's identification with and support for the School of Agriculture at Auburn, which they believed received funding which should have gone instead to the engineering program. They saw Dowell's opposition to football, his imposition of a puritanical moral code, and his preference for agriculture over engineering as evidence of his anti-progressive tendencies. This paper examines the political crosscurrents and conflicting visions of the southern progressive ideology that helped create the Auburn football controversy of 1927.