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The College All-Star Game: A Transformation of American Football

The College All-Star Game football series, which was played in Chicago from 1934 to 1976, was a major factor in the popularization and growth of professional football. The present paper examines this issue. It also considers how the annual All-Star game helped to extend college football's aura of respectability to include the professional version of the sport; and to provide a stage on which to view the transformations American sport underwent in the period spanning the Great Depression and the late twentieth century.

By 1934, although the National Football League (founded in 1919) was beginning to stabilize, it was still struggling to establish itself nationally. For professional football team owners, an annual pre-season spectacular would provide the national publicity and exposure that was necessary to take the "play-for-pay" game to a higher level of public and media acceptance. But not everyone was wildly enthusiastic about the proposed match-up between teams of professionals and collegians. The college game presented itself as above the common rabble that populated the world of professional football and many conferences sought to defend their amateurism by restricting contact between collegiate and professional teams.

However, to the dismay of the amateur lobby, the College All-Star Game series was established and from the very beginning enjoyed immense popularity. The spectacle, tradition, and ceremony that grew up around the All-Star game placed professional football and its style of play right in the glaring spotlight for the whole country to see. The event became an annual media circus, drawing well over 300 sportswriters from around the country each summer. From the late 1940s to the 1970s the All-Star event reflected the impressive development of the professional versus the collegiate game, as NFL teams piled up wins year after year. Despite this, the series retained its popularity through the 1950s and 1970s succumbing only in the 1970s when national television ratings declined; by 1976, its time had come.