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## ***Midwestern Ivy: John Millis, Football Reform and the Presidents' Conference***

In the years immediately following World War II, both scandals and reform dotted the college athletic landscape. The best known changes were in the East, but in the heartland a grouping of institutions known as the Presidents' Conference sprang from the same reform impulse that gave rise to the Ivy League.

In 1951 and 1952, in response to the same kinds of problems that drove private schools in the east to de-emphasize football, John Millis, president of Western Case Reserve University in Cleveland, proposed a reformed athletic conference. Millis' proposals almost mirrored the recommendations of the Special Committee of the American Council of Education, on which he had served, most notably in calling for presidential control of athletics. The conference that Millis built from the ACE proposals almost completely replicated the Ivy League, and what is more, predated the Ivy schools in providing for round-robin play.

The Presidents' Conference embodied the same concepts as the Ivy League, and arose from many of the same causes. Millis' own institution, Western Reserve University in Cleveland had moved in the 1930s towards recruiting and subsidizing high-caliber football players and while it was able to establish a winning program as a consequence, after World War II financial pressures mounted. Western Reserve, together with Wayne State and other mainly private urban institutions like Cincinnati began the attempt to set up a structure built on the principles of non-subsidized athletics and parity of competition. With Millis at its head, this reform movement resulted in the Presidents' Conference.

In the post-World War II period, private urban institutions generally suffered a decline in athletic prowess and gate receipts. They simply could not keep up-and in many cases did not want to keep up-with state institutions. Added to this were the problems of television and professional football. The reform impulses of urban schools, such as the Presidents' Conference, can be understood as deriving from a combination of outrage at existing practices and concern over athletic finances traditionally supported by football.

The athletic reforms of the Presidents' Conference were a significant part of the broader reform movement of the early 1950s and deserve to have the same renown as those of the Ivy League. Yet while its eastern counterpart is lauded for its mediocre but 'pure' athletics, Midwestern Ivy is most often seen as simply a further step towards post-war downsizing. This paper shows just how much the two had in common.