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The Occidental Traveler: **Frank Aydelotte and the Threat to Football Reform at Swarthmore**

In 1936, President Frank Aydelotte of Swarthmore College near Philadelphia received a remarkable invitation from Rensen Bird, the president of Occidental College in Los Angeles. Bird wanted to initiate an intersectional football series between the two schools that had acquired reputations for scrupulously clean and strictly amateur athletics. What made this proposal unusual was that Bird had a plan for football excursions that included extensive feting, entertaining and sightseeing for the teams involved.

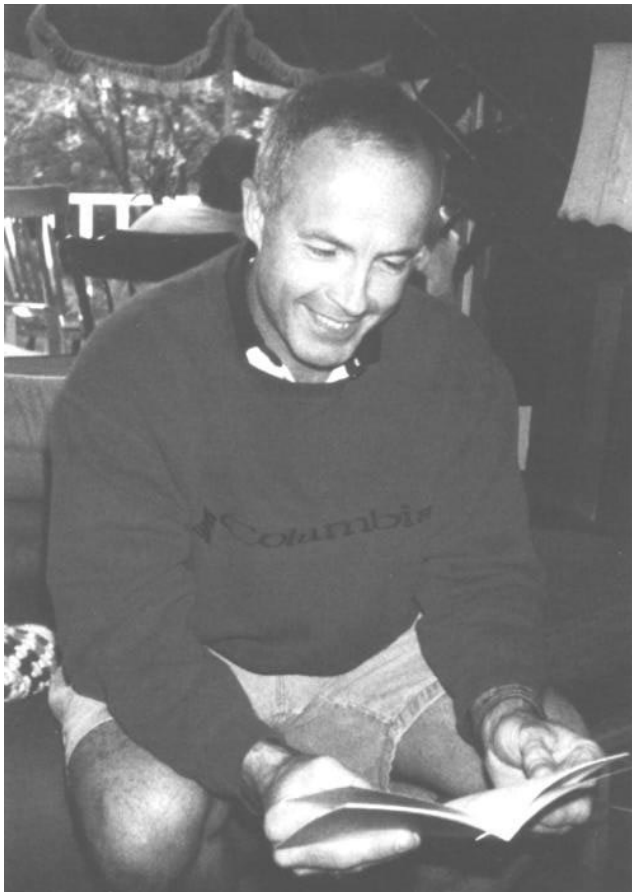
A native of New York City, Bird had studied in Germany, worked in Europe during World War I, and then moved to California as a young professor. He believed strongly in the value of travel and sought to break out of the isolation that the West Coast still experienced in the 1930s. Put simply, the football proposal was quite in keeping with his restless, visionary, “can-do” personality.

In spite of the seductiveness of the offer, Aydelotte turned it down. He did so because he strongly believed in reforming big-time athletics. When he arrived at Swarthmore in 1921, the small Quaker school had a reputation, for tough, gritty, highly subsidized football teams. Though he had played for Indiana, Aydelotte had far more interest in academics than athletics. He began by banishing the tramp athletes whom the booster alumni recruited and supported. By the late 1920s he had taken control of football and gradually eased Swarthmore into a schedule with schools of similar size and mission. While he was reforming athletics he was also building Swarthmore into a respected academic institution.

In the 1930s an emerging reform athletic ideology rejected the commercial trappings of big-time football. When Aydelotte read Bird’s proposal, he glimpsed the small-college version of the Rose Bowl. He explained to Bird that there was too much emphasis on football. Thoughtful people might wonder if they had a commitment to sane, rational athletics. He could not justify either the expense or the study time that the games would cost the student-athletes.

In 1940, Aydelotte’s last year at Swarthmore before moving to the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, the football team went undefeated for the first time ever, playing small-college competition with a strictly amateur team. In 1995, more than a half century later, Swarthmore had two landmark events that reflected back on Aydelotte’s stubborn commitment to reform. It was picked by *U.S. News and World Report* as the number one liberal arts college in the country and, equally remarkable, the football team went 0-10, a mirror image of Swarthmore’s academic rating.

Aydelotte's decision to turn down the tempting offer of the "Occidental Traveler" strongly suggests that less emphasis on big-time college athletics and more on sound athletics can and often does have a lasting effect. It surely did at Swarthmore.



Don Morrow reviews the program at the Smiths.