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The Football Crisis of 1905-1909: Was It Really a Crisis?

The injury crisis of 1905 has long been regarded as the reaction to a spate of deaths and injuries in college football that had reached unacceptable levels that year. It was also the basis of a longstanding myth that President Theodore Roosevelt threatened to shut down the game when he saw a newspaper photograph of Swarthmore lineman, Bob “Tiny” Maxwell, his face bloodied in a brutal contest with Pennsylvania.

Though there were eighteen casualties, only three were in college games. The most far-reaching took place in Manhattan when Union College’s Harold Moore died from injuries suffered against New York University. After failing to get Harvard’s president, Charles Eliot, to call a reform conference, Chancellor Henry McCracken of NYU called two conferences, as a result of which the NCAA would be formed. The second conference led to a host of reforms, including the introduction of the forward pass.

The uproar over three deaths suggests that the critics and reformers had a number of agendas. Many a faculty that had lost control of football to students and alumni wanted to downsize programs. Their efforts were reflected in the reforms of the Big Nine's Angell Conference in 1906 that reduced the number of games, set ticket prices at fifty cents, and established strict eligibility requirements. Harvard's coach, Bill Reid, had an alumni committee draw up a series of rule changes in an attempt to co-opt Yale's Walter Camp. Presidents Wheeler and Jordan of California and Stanford used the opportunity to substitute rugby union for American football. Like Columbia's president, Nicholas Murray Butler, who abolished football in 1905, they disliked the fact that football distracted students from their academic work.

In 1909, football once again descended into an abyss of injuries and deaths. This time the death toll in the college game soared to eleven -the result of new rules that players and coaches had introduced.

In football history, the 1905 injury crisis has operated like the Abner Doubleday myth in baseball. "Tiny" Maxwell, the stammering behemoth of the Swarthmore gridiron provided the perfect metaphor for the modernization of football and whereas baseball could only find a relatively obscure Civil War general, it had a ready-made folk hero and American president, Teddy Roosevelt. Football may never have seen a more remarkable season than 1905 during which a non-crisis or mini-crisis provided a springboard for so many assaults on the gridiron game.