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The Terror of the Minor Colleges: A History of St. Bonaventure Football

In the last decade of the nineteenth century football had become a significant part of American culture, so much so that a majority of St. Bonaventure's students were coming to school with football experience. Football was regularly being played on campus in the form of class games (intramurals) throughout the decade. In 1895, the student body organized an association to raise money for a football program. The association was entirely student-run. During the early years, the program was entirely funded by donations from the student body. Players elected the captain, who made personnel decisions and ran practices. Occasionally, one of the captains may have been convinced to stay around after graduation and take courses in the seminary providing a source of coaching for another year. The student body elected a manager, who in turn arranged a schedule of competition. After two seasons of competition, the faculty put a stop to the football program, presumably because it was a distraction from the academic objectives of the University.

For seven years, football returned to the intramural format that had preceded the program. During those seven years the study body petitioned the faculty, to no avail, for the right to play football off campus. Finally in 1903, the student body went over the heads of the faculty to the President of the University, who overruled his faculty and allowed the student body to have football, essentially rendering faculty efforts to control athletics irrelevant from that point forward. Through the first decade of the twentieth century, the student athletic association controlled athletics. They appeared unconcerned about national norms regarding eligibility as well the amateur code. Games were played against area club teams, semi-professional teams, and when a game could be found, against other colleges and universities. They frequently used graduate students on the team. At least two players were known to have competed in five seasons of competition, and yet another competed in six seasons. This all ended in 1915, when James McLaughlin was hired as the college's first true coach. As an employee of the university, he scheduled

games, monitored eligibility, ran practices and made personnel decisions, and the university supported the program financially.

On a small scale, St. Bonaventure University began to copy Notre Dame's formula for success, content to be described as "the terror of minor colleges," playing other small colleges and universities in geographic proximity in the years prior to World War II, and increasing the magnitude of their commitment to football after World War II. St. Bonaventure was only one of many Universities during the years immediately following World War II to take advantage of the G. I. Bill and at the same time improve their football team. The team began to schedule games across the country and against nationally prestigious competition. In spite of the resurgence of success in the post-war years, the Board of Trustees voted to abandon football after the 1951 season. The official reason for abandoning football was that it was too expensive to continue, but clearly the president and chief financial officer exaggerated those losses.
