

INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORT

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The Oberlin Experiment: Athletic Revolutions and Institutional Identities

Perhaps no other institution historically reflects the use of intercollegiate athletics to craft an institutional identity than the University of Chicago. The school's first president, William Harper, built a football program to signal the University of Chicago as one of the nation's elite colleges. Several decades later, President Robert Hutchins reinforced the University of Chicago's commitment to elite higher education by ceremoniously eliminating the football program. Similar examples are in abundance, including the University of Pennsylvania's commitment to the Ivy League, schools used as "booster colleges," and Notre Dame's appeal to the American Catholic community. It could be hypothesized that every institution in the United States crafts its athletic department (or lack of athletic department) ideology to represent the institutional image.

To illuminate this hypothesis, I reconstruct the tumultuous and short-lived "Jack Scott era" at Oberlin College in the early 1970s. Oberlin College, a small liberal arts college in Ohio, entered the 1970s with a new, young institutional president. Nationally recognized for its progressive nature (especially with respect to gender and racial issues), new President Robert Works Fuller came to Oberlin with a new radical mandate to reformulate liberal education. Part of Fuller's agenda included overhauling the historically celebrated and influential physical education and athletic department.

Jack Scott, to Robert Fuller, embodied the image of the New Left of athletics and physical education. Scott entered the mainstream consciousness through his involvement with Harry Edwards, and the 1968 Black Power movement. While at the University of California - Berkeley, Scott drew the ire of coaches, athletic directors, and even Vice President Spiro Agnew for his radical, anti-establishment book The Athletic Revolution. A brief association with the University of Washington ended in legal proceedings after pressure from athletic personnel revoked an offer

of employment. This left Scott available – an opportunity Fuller could not resist. Despite vigorous protests, Fuller ignored faculty, alumni, and students and hired Jack Scott as Oberlin's Athletic Director and Chair of Physical Education to redefine the institution's athletic image.

The "Oberlin Experiment" ended with lies, covet-ups, animosity, and both Fuller and Scott losing their positions. The story of Jack Scott's years at Oberlin simultaneously illuminates many significant historical moments, including the ramifications of the Vietnam era on higher education and athletics, the autonomy of American colleges to craft institutional images, and the significance of athletics on campuses across the United States.
