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Sports and Their Fans

St. Norbert College

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Spring 2009 | Finding the Balance



Kevin Quinn

New book from sports economist

Kevin Quinn's "Sports and their Fans: the History, Economics and Culture of the Relationship Between Spectator and Sport," (McFarland, 2009) appears this spring. This excerpt from Quinn's manuscript addresses the origins of college and, later, professional football.

About the same time that well-heeled 20- and 30-somethings were forming amateur baseball clubs, college boys – perhaps as always – sought to prove their manhood. During the 1820s, Ivy Leaguers at Princeton and Dartmouth played a rough sport similar to the soccer-like game allegedly invented in 1823 by William Ellis at Rugby College in England. While the game of rugby had codified rules by 1845, it was not until 1871 when the Dartmouth version of the game, "Old Division Football," had its rules written down.

In fact, by the middle of the 1800s, it was common practice for each institution to have its own violent form of a "foot-ball" game, complete with its own unique rules – sometimes unwritten. Schools regularly challenged each other to matches, with home teams commonly providing referees who interpreted the peculiarities of local convention. The first "real" football game is generally acknowledged to have been played in New Brunswick, N.J., in November of 1869 between Rutgers and Princeton. About 100 fans were in attendance.

By 1873, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia had agreed on a set of rules based on the Yale version of the game in which players could not run with the ball; not surprisingly Harvard held out of the alliance. The Crimson Tide favored the "Boston" version of the game in which running was permitted. Eventually, Harvard's rules prevailed, and in the 1880s, Yale's doctor-alum-coach Walter Camp began his relentless lifelong mission to refine and promote the game. Among Camp's many innovations were the 10-yard first down, four downs, 11-man teams and the line of scrimmage. Under his direction, the Yale football team won 97 percent of its games between 1883 and 1887.



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Sports and their fans

An excerpt from a new book on the history, economics and culture of the relationship between spectator and sport.



An aardvark a day

In this gallery of images, animal spirits prevail.



Journalist in disguise

A look at two books authored by **President Tom Kunkel**.



Stepping out of the picture

An artist reflects on his recent

It wasn't very long before intercollegiate football rivalries began to arise. Yale-Harvard football, for example, seemed as natural as Oxford-Cambridge crew, although with considerably more broken teeth. College faculties took a dim view of the brutal game, and generally banned the sport from campuses. Undeterred, students played off-campus, no doubt drawing local student and townie crowds to their often-bloody spectacles.

While crew, cricket, rifle, lacrosse, bicycling, tennis, polo, cross-country, fencing, basketball, trap shooting, golf, water polo, swimming and gymnastics were also played intercollegiately during the last half of the 19th century, by the 1890s it was football that sparked the greatest interest among spectators. As early as 1878, the student organizers of a Princeton-Yale game rented a Hoboken field for \$300, drawing over 4,000 fans. The annual Thanksgiving Day championship game for the student-run Intercollegiate Football Association, first played in 1876, soon became the premier spectator athletic event in the country. In the 1890s, the game was played at the Polo Grounds in New York City, regularly drawing 40,000 or more spectators.

While the Thanksgiving contenders usually were the august Princeton and Yale, the event was roundly criticized for the violence, drinking and betting that it begat among spectators. Such tomfoolery did not sit well with frontier religion neo-puritans. One such group, the Popular Amusements Committee of the 1894 Kansas Methodist Conference, called upon the presidents of their institutions of higher learning to prohibit the game. They were little heeded, particularly on the East Coast, and the game remained popular and vicious. By 1895, perhaps as many as 120,000 college, high school and club athletes played in 5,000 or more Thanksgiving Day football games.

Harvard and Yale cleared about \$50,000 per year each for the 1900 season – over \$1 million in 2006 dollars. Ten years later, the two schools were even making about 70 percent more annually from the sport.

Big bucks meant "pay-for-play" cheating and other financial temptations. Amid scandals and a rash of player deaths and serious injuries, President Theodore Roosevelt – a strong proponent of gentlemanly but rigorous amateur sports – called football coaches and athletic representatives from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to the White House in early 1905. But the ensuing season resulted in the deaths of another 18 players, so Roosevelt convened a second meeting that October at which he leaned on the three schools' representatives to reform the sport. The National Collegiate Athletic Association traces its origins to these 1905 meetings.

Harvard's president, Charles W. Ellis, was particularly proactive in taking Roosevelt's advice, as the school had a new football-only stadium to fill. Costing \$310,000 (about \$7 million in 2006 dollars), Harvard Stadium was constructed over a four-and-a-half month period from 250,000 cubic feet of concrete. Opened in 1903, it had a capacity of 22,500 fans, which was expanded by 1929 to 57,750. While college faculties might have disdained football – some still do – college presidents don't get to be college presidents by missing significant revenue opportunities.

The other Ivies, naturally, were not terribly far behind in cashing in on the football craze. The 70,869-seat Yale Bowl, replacing the 33,000-seat Yale Field, was opened in 1914 at a cost of \$750,000 (about \$16 million in 2006). Princeton's now-replaced 45,725-seat Palmer Stadium also opened in 1914, and Brown's 25,597-seat Schoelkopf Field was unveiled the following year. Large venues were built at Dartmouth (20,416) and Penn (52,593) for the 1923 season, and at Brown (20,000) in 1925. Other schools also saw the revenue potential in large college football stadia,

work.



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particularly in the Midwest and West: University of Wisconsin (1917), University of Washington (1920), Ohio State (1922), Purdue (1924) and Notre Dame (1930).

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