College Football, 1884

Major college football is big business. Each autumn weekend millions of fans pack stadiums around the country to root for their favorite team. Millions more watch on television. A major college football program, such as Ohio State, Notre Dame or Texas, generates big bucks - an average of over 29 million dollars annually with some topping 50 million dollars a year.

It all started shortly after the Civil War when students at a few eastern colleges combined elements from rugby and soccer to make a new game they called football. Students at Princeton led the way in 1867 by establishing the first rules for the game. The first intercollegiate game was played in 1869 between Princeton and Rutgers. The game was taken up by the Ivy League schools and by 1873 an agreed-upon set of rules was established. Football was on its way to becoming the dominate college sport.

Amos Alonzo Stagg contributed much to the development of the sport and remains a football legend. He entered Yale in 1884 as a divinity student which qualified him for a reduction in tuition from $50.00 to $39.80 per semester. He was a natural athlete whose skill on the baseball diamond was a major factor in his admission.

He joined the fledgling football team and after graduation in 1888 became football coach at Springfield College (Mass.). In 1892 he became athletic director and football coach at the University of Chicago, remaining there for the next 41 years. His age forced him to retire, but he was not done coaching. In 1933 he became a coach at the College of the Pacific and left that post in 1947 at the age of 85. But wait, he's not done yet, for in that same year he becomes an assistant coach at Susquehanna University (Pa.) and does not go into final retirement until 1952 at the age of 90.

During his long career, Coach Stagg helped codify the rules of football and introduced several innovative plays such as the lateral pass and the man in motion. He was elected to the Football Hall of Fame as a player and a coach in its inaugural year.

"There were no coaches, trainers, rubbers, or even a water boy."

Amos Stagg published his memoirs of early football in 1927. We join his story after his admission to Yale:

"The recruiting officers already were at work, it will be seen, and not always so unobjectionably, apparently, for in 1881 the intercollegiate convention had agreed to bar players whose college expenses were paid.

Months before, I had written President Noah Porter, of Yale, and in due time he had answered me personally in his own hand. 'To good scholars the college has given from the Ellsworth Fund $175 a year,' President Porter wrote. 'Beyond this the college, as such, can do little or nothing; but opportunities for self-help present themselves and are soon discovered by those who keep their eyes open to discern them.'

I arrived at Yale in September, 1884, and turned out for the squad. The college bought its first athletic field that year...Paying good money for a playground caused talk and revived faculty criticism of the attention being given to athletics. Prof. E. L. Richards, who promoted the present Yale gym, dug into the records on his own initiative, proved that disciplinary cases had decreased sharply and progressively since 1875, and silenced the conservatives.

The old gym was a primitive thing where freshmen were marshaled in street dress and forced to swing Indian clubs and dumbbells. No bath followed and the drill probably did as much harm as good. One of the joys of growing to sophomore stature was escaping the gym...

There were no coaches, trainers, rubbers, or even a water boy. Occasional graduated players were drifting back to advise the football team, but the captain still was a captain, not a coach's foreman. He chose the team, ran it, and was not always above playing favorites.

Once elected, he was answerable to no one. Walter Camp was in business in New Haven and interested in the team, of course. Once under Camp's captaincy the Yale squad came near dissolving in mid-season over a quarrel between the forwards and the backs. Camp and his fellow backs favored the newer running mass style of play. The rush line was unanimous naturally for the old open, kicking, passing, individual running game in which they could be as spectacular as the backs.

Camp was particularly fearful of a muddy field for the Thanksgiving Day game with Princeton, with Eaton and Fred Remington, heavy ends, and insisted on drilling the line in mass formations. The line revolted. That night Camp summoned the squad to his room in Durfee Hall, told them that the responsibility was his, that he either would run the team or get off, resigned and left the room. Ten minutes of heated debate followed. The rush line was as little convinced as ever, but so disturbed at the threatened loss of Camp's leadership that they coaxed him back. Camp led the eleven against Princeton and won, but Yale played the old open game.

Camp resigned another time. There were no training rules or training table, but the squad had pledged themselves not to leave the campus for ten days before the Princeton game, and to be in bed by eleven each night.

Catching Johnny Moorehead sneaking back from the theater one night late, Camp called every man out of bed and quit on the spot. Moorehead offered his own resignation instead, and Camp reconsidered. As Moorehead played in the Princeton game, he seems to have been restored to grace.

At Princeton as early as 1879 the students had so criticized the football squad for smoking that the players gradually gave up tobacco during the season.

In those years at Princeton the team customarily practiced at noon and jog-trotted half a mile to a mile at sundown. A full three-quarters of-an-hour period of continuous playing against the scrubs was Yale's daily practice, and injuries were disregarded. There was no freshman rule, but no particular attempt was made to interest the incoming class. Two or three dependable substitutes were all that a team thought of needing. The freshman who made the varsity was either a natural player or had played in prep school. The bulk of the newcomers never had seen the game. If they turned out, they were expected to teach themselves." "

References:

Amos Stagg's account appears in: Stagg, Amos Alonzo, Touchdown! (1927); Hill, Dean, Football thru the Years (1940).