
Review: The Tail That Wags the Dog: Football and the American University
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Source: *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), pp. 629-634
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030717>
Accessed: 10/06/2010 17:26

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THE TAIL THAT WAGS THE DOG: FOOTBALL AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Charles H. Martin

Robin Lester. *Stagg's University: The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Big-Time Football at Chicago.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. xxii + 301 pp. Photographs, appendixes, notes, and index. \$32.95.

Fifty-seven years have now passed since the University of Chicago shocked the sports world by abolishing its once prestigious football program in 1939. Most educators and sports fans have long since forgotten this controversial decision, as well as Chicago's previous gridiron accomplishments. Yet during the first quarter of the twentieth century the original "monsters of the midway," guided by legendary coach Amos Alonzo Stagg, established themselves as a national powerhouse and a dominant force in the Big Ten Conference. Chicago's football success played a pivotal role both in attracting public support for the new university and in making football a genuine national sport. No other college better embodied the Faustian bargain of combining big-time football with serious academic life than did Chicago, where Stagg's athletic empire dominated the campus for decades. To the community and the nation, Chicago truly was "Stagg's University."

Robin Lester, a social and cultural historian, has rescued those "glory days" from obscurity, but he has done much more than merely revive faded memories of heroic stars, exciting plays, and triumphal seasons. Instead he skillfully develops the Chicago story into a case study of the creation of a national collegiate sporting culture and the construction of football as a secular ritual for both town and gown. Chicago played a central role in this process "because Stagg's university pioneered in making football a mass entertainment industry on the American campus" (p. xvii). The author also explores in detail the corrosive influence of intercollegiate athletics within the university, a sensitive area that most official college histories prudently avoid. Although Lester's account ends in 1939, the problems that he identifies concerning the relationship of athletics and academics remain as central to campus life today as they were nearly a century ago.

Lester first stumbled onto his topic thirty years ago when as a young Chicago graduate student working in the library he was assigned the task of

unpacking the recently acquired Amos Alonzo Stagg papers. This accidental encounter between student and manuscript collection has produced an important study, though one whose appearance in print has been long delayed. The book's narrative revolves around the interplay of three major themes: the specific gridiron exploits of Chicago football teams, the educational development and internal politics of the university, and the spread of a national collegiate football culture which created unprecedented public support for American universities. By examining Chicago football within the broader social and cultural forces of the period, the book is representative of the rapidly growing body of outstanding sport history studies now appearing in print. Recent works by such scholars as Susan Cahn, Susan Cayleff, Allen Guttman, Peter Levine, Michael Oriard, and G. Edward White have clearly demonstrated the growing sophistication of the field.¹ A volume in the pioneering "Sport and Society" series of the University of Illinois Press, *Stagg's University* is a worthy addition to this literature.

One of Lester's most valuable contributions is his demythologization of the pre-World War II period of college sports. Readers who expect the book to portray an innocent era when college football was uncorrupted by allegedly modern vices will be severely disappointed. Beginning with unethical recruiting, schools also provided hidden financial assistance and other forms of preferential treatment to their athletes, who in turn were sometimes poorly prepared for college work, frequently absent from class, and often negligent in completing their degrees. Academic fraud was commonplace. Even Stagg himself does not escape Lester's careful scrutiny. Although his personal ethics were higher than those of many in the profession, the powerful coach regularly convinced administrators and selected professors to provide special consideration for his athletes in order to keep these putative scholars eligible to play. Such problems were not unique to Chicago, of course. Murray Sperber's recent examination of Knute Rockne and Notre Dame athletics, *Shake Down the Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football* (1993), exposes even more flagrant abuses and mythmaking. Anyone who is optimistic that recent reforms have significantly altered the nature of college athletics should look carefully at Lester's book, which suggests that most of the system's problems are deeply rooted and surprisingly resilient. As he observes, "The twentieth-century intercollegiate football industry has shown a remarkable ability to survive each rare reform binge and to emerge with a firmer hold on institutions and market" (p. xxi).

The saga of All-American quarterback Walter Ekersall further illustrates the hypocrisy already present in college football by the early 1900s. Ekersall was a remarkably elusive runner and charismatic team leader whose exploits dazzled sports fans across the country. One exuberant journalist labeled him

“the brightest star in the football firmament” (p. 59). His accomplishments were so outstanding that in 1969 sportswriters selected him for the All-Time All-America team composed of players from the first fifty years of college football. Yet Ekersall “compiled an atrocious academic record” (p. 57) while enrolled at the university and led the squad not only in touchdowns but also in missed classes and failing grades. In January 1907, two months after he completed his brilliant football career, Chicago expelled the national folk hero for academic deficiencies and bad debts. Subsequently Ekersall went on to become a well-known midwestern sportswriter and football game official. In yet another example of the sport’s ethical confusion, he would sometimes accept a paid offer to handle advance publicity for a football match which he was already scheduled to referee, and which he also was assigned to cover for his newspaper!

In addition to Stagg, Lester’s book concentrates on two other towering figures in the history of the University of Chicago—William Rainey Harper, the school’s first president, and Robert Maynard Hutchins, who reshaped the college during the 1930s and eventually abandoned football. In recruiting the initial faculty for the school’s 1892 opening, President Harper aggressively lured the youthful Stagg westward by offering him the huge annual salary of \$2,500 and by making him both the tenured head of the Department of Physical Culture and Athletics and the chief coach of the school’s nonexistent football team, an unprecedented action at the time. A former baseball and football star at Yale, where he also attended divinity school, Stagg was an enthusiastic advocate of muscular Christianity who firmly believed that sports built manliness and character. Yet athletic activity offered other educational benefits as well. Harper and Stagg quickly realized the value of sports in creating school spirit and building a sense of community on the new campus. Furthermore, both men also understood that football served as an excellent public relations device through which to win the support of the surrounding community and create a larger university constituency. Finally, football proved to be a highly profitable business at Chicago, generating considerable revenue for the school until the late 1920s. Thus President Harper and the university warmly and unabashedly embraced the commercial and public relations potential of big-time football literally from the school’s birth.

Initially Harper protected Stagg against hostile colleagues until he developed his teams into proven winners and gained a powerful network of support from sports fans and alumni. In 1905 Chicago demonstrated its new standing in college football when the Maroons capped an undefeated season by upsetting Michigan 2–0 before an overflowing crowd of 27,000 cheering fans in the windy city. This dramatic victory earned Chicago the Big Ten title,

as well as the unofficial national championship, and it firmly established the team as one of the nation's elite programs. Faculty members at the university soon launched a modest campaign to assert some control over the athletic program as part of a national movement to clean up college football, but they eventually returned to their books in defeat, leaving Stagg's empire intact. In 1921 Chicago and midwestern football achieved a major milestone when Princeton agreed to a home-and-home series with the Maroons. Along with Yale and Harvard, Princeton was one of the elite Big Three of college sports, none of which had ever previously deigned to visit the West for a football game. Thus Princeton's participation in the series, as well as Chicago's 9-0 upset of the Tigers in their inaugural match, "provided dramatic proof of cultural parity" as well as athletic equality in college football (p. 117).

Ironically Stagg's success in creating widespread enthusiasm for football across the Midwest unleashed athletic forces which led to the diminution and eventual downfall of his own program. The 1924 season, in which the Maroons captured the Big Ten championship, was the last successful fall campaign for Stagg, whose squads declined steadily thereafter. In order to strengthen their teams, rival institutions undertook measures which Chicago, not previously noted for its moral sensitivity over athletics, refused to implement. The university gradually discovered that the absence of a physical education major, rising entrance standards, stricter curricular requirements, declining enrollments, and continuing academic fraud elsewhere were all factors which undermined its previous dominance. His power on campus finally waning, Stagg failed to win exemptions for his athletic program from these internal changes. Worse yet, the selection in 1929 of Robert Maynard Hutchins to head the university placed in the president's office a strong educator who not only distrusted big-time sports but also disliked the basic concept of physical culture itself.

In 1933 the university refused to renew the contract of the seventy-year-old Stagg. Determined to continue his career, the spurned coach headed west to California, where he directed the football program at the College of the Pacific until again forced to retire, this time at age eighty-four. Once Stagg left Chicago, the decline of the school's football program became more obvious under his benighted successor, Clark Shaughnessy. From 1933 through 1939 Shaughnessy's increasingly pathetic teams could win only 17 percent of their Big Ten games, and attendance fell to new lows. In the disastrous season of 1939, the Maroons did manage to defeat two small college teams but lost all five of their big games against major opponents by the combined point total of 300-0. Michigan's 85-0 slaughter of the Maroons at Stagg Field offered graphic proof of the depths to which Chicago football had fallen. These dismal results set off a deep crisis over the sport's future and led to one of the

most difficult decisions ever made by an American university. With the cautious support of the trustees, President Hutchins rejected suggestions to reemphasize football or to play at a lower level of competition and announced that the college would reluctantly abolish its football program. Sportswriters and some alumni responded with predictable outrage over the news, but broader public opinion generally supported this drastic step. Despite Chicago's courageous example, no other major college dared to take similar action. Thus "even at Chicago it required an extraordinary combination of factors to abolish the sport" (p. xx).

Lester's book makes an important contribution to social, cultural, and sport history by expanding our knowledge of college football's formative decades. The volume is particularly valuable for its detailed and realistic depiction of how big-time football influenced university life, as well as how the roles of players, coaches, and spectators changed over the decades. Lester's lively narrative remains focused and concise; in fact, he could easily have expanded his coverage of several issues without unduly lengthening the book or straining his readers' patience. For example, the development of the infant sport of American football at eastern colleges prior to Chicago's founding in 1892 is not explained. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton simply exist as the elite Big Three; how they achieved this lofty status is never spelled out. Lester does a good job of identifying Stagg's numerous technical contributions to the modern sport, especially his utilization of the open game and the forward pass. However, his discussion of Stagg's commitment to muscular Christianity and football's relationship to manliness is restricted to the early part of the book. Perhaps this is because Stagg and the university came to view the sport increasingly as a profitable business and less as a builder of character. Nonetheless, further attention to the construction of masculinity through football would have enhanced the book's value.

Despite Lester's rich exposition of intercollegiate football at Chicago, he slights the rest of the school's athletic program and its relationship to university life. The author does note that, unlike many rival coaches, Stagg failed to exploit the intramural sports program as a feeder system for his varsity teams. But why the university began to emphasize intramurals in the early 1930s and how genuinely interested the students were in these activities are questions that remain unanswered. The fate of the school's "minor" sports and its intramural program after the demise of football is another unexplored subject. Yet Lester does toss out one provocative hypothesis about post-1939 developments in his epilogue: that Chicago suffered a gradual erosion of its national standing in higher education, based on enrollment growth and academic rankings, because it dropped football. Unfortunately he does not pursue this intriguing argument. The financial cost to Chicago of abandoning

football, and the academic cost to its fellow universities of retaining the sport, are questions which can only be answered by further research. In his introduction Lester writes that "the American academy has done remarkably little investigation of the origins and course of this historical" relationship between athletics and academics (p. xvii). *Stagg's University* takes an important first step toward remedying this deficiency.

Charles H. Martin, Department of History, University of Texas at El Paso, is currently completing a book on the racial integration of major college sports in the American South.

1. Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (1994); Susan Cayleff, *Babe: The Life and Legend of Babe Didrikson Zaharias* (1995); Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (1994); Peter Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (1992); Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (1993); G. Edward White, *Creating the National Pastime: Baseball Transforms Itself, 1903-1953* (1996).