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How the Civil War Created College Football

By Amanda Brickell Bellows January 1, 2015 4:51 pm

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

At a ceremony in Cambridge, Mass., on June 10, 1890, the philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson declared, “I ask to make [Soldiers Field] a memorial to some dear friends who gave their lives … to their country and to their fellow men in the hour of great need — the War of the Rebellion.” The 31 acres of marshlands and pasture that Higginson donated to Harvard College, his alma mater, would serve as the site of the country’s oldest concrete football arena, Harvard Stadium, built over a decade later in 1903. As he memorialized the Civil War dead, the Union veteran addressed a group of 400 male students and alumni, most of whom were too young to have experienced and learned from the horrors of battle during the nation’s bloodiest war. Like Higginson, however, many late-19th-century Americans saw a deep connection between the battlefield and the athletic field, believing that collegiate athletics, including football, could teach the next generation their “own duties as men and citizens of the Republic” and train them to manage “the burden of carrying on this country in the best way.”

Prior to football’s postwar rise in popularity, antebellum Americans enjoyed sporting events like boxing, harness racing and early forms of baseball. According to the historians Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, however, the Civil War “engendered an ethos of sacrifice, of dedication to the heroic cause” in male soldiers who played a variety of organized sports on teams within military units. After the war’s end, universities took on the role of creating student athletes through organized sports initiatives that inculcated young men with the Victorian

virtues of masculinity and sportsmanship. Educational institutions began to emphasize the importance of athletics; in 1872, The New York World remarked: "There can scarcely be any question … that the increasing impulse towards athletics in all our colleges is in itself a good thing."

Football was one of the most popular of these new collegiate activities, and it developed rapidly. The first intercollegiate American football game occurred on Nov. 6, 1869, when students from Princeton and Rutgers faced off in an informal match. Rutgers confronted Columbia in 1870, and Harvard and Yale first battled in 1875. University football teams continued to multiply in number after Princeton, Yale, Columbia and Harvard established the Intercollegiate Football Association in 1876.

A hybrid of early American folk football and British rugby, post-bellum American football was a violent sport that, according to the historian Allen Guttmann, appealed to young men hoping to "demonstrate the manly courage that their fathers and older brothers had recently proved on the bloody battlefields of the Civil War." Bravery was a prerequisite for players in an era preceding the widespread use of helmets. In 1905 alone, 18 players were killed and 159 sustained severe wounds, statistics that motivated several universities to shut down the sport on their campuses. Despite its rough nature, football continued to flourish at many leading institutions.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Americans imbued football games with military significance. In 1908, The New York Tribune noted that "football as played in America to-day between schools or colleges is not a mere game," but "an intercollegiate contest [that] assumes in the minds of players, coaches, students, graduates, and the affiliated public the importance of war."

Many viewed football as a way of training the next generation of men for military service. Harper's Weekly stated in 1898 that "the value of football as a means of keeping alive a martial spirit in time of peace has been abundantly dwelt upon," and that "veteran football-players would be expected to excel … if war came." Describing Princeton's triumphant football team in 1897, the sportswriter Caspar Whitney declared, "Had those same men been drilled in the science of war

instead of in the science of football, the same persistency of purpose and unity of endeavor would have attained the same conquest over their opponents."

For many, football was itself training for war. Football manuals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries describe the sport as a military endeavor. In his 1895 "Book of College Sports," Yale's coach, Walter Camp, encouraged players to exhibit the bravery of a soldier entering a difficult battle, writing that a player should "face it like a man … on the side of the men who want no chance of retreat or escape, only a fair contest and certain victory or defeat at the end of it." In 1921, Charles Daly, the coach of the United States Military Academy, called football "a war game" and described troops marching to battle, teams combatting an enemy squad, scouts reconnoitering and linemen charging in his manual "American Football: How to Play It." Striving to show the "remarkable similarity [that] exists between war and football," Daly even advocated the application of military exercises to players, arguing, "No soldier ever benefited more by intensive and carefully planned drill than does the football player."

Football's traditions further reveal its martial sensibilities. The political scientist Michael Mandelbaum notes that athletes stream onto the field in brightly colored uniforms, marching bands perform rousing tunes and students collectively sing to encourage their champions. Intriguingly, early fight songs reveal that memories of the Civil War persisted in the popular mind during the postwar era. Just six years after the war ended, Rutgers students chanted, "We'll quickly bury all the slain / And to-morrow the living are ready again, / To follow that bully foot-ball" in their "Foot-Ball Song."

Reflecting on the nation's wartime wounds, educators sought to equip young men for military action by teaching them about masculinity and courage through collegiate football. Americans' desire to remember or learn from the conflict shaped the sport's militaristic rules, lexicon, rituals and popular perceptions. As a result, football's Civil War lineage is still perceptible today.

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Sources: "Four Addresses by Henry Lee Higginson"; Harper's Weekly, Jan. 23, 1897; Harper's Weekly, March 26, 1898; New York Tribune, Oct. 25, 1908; Charles Daly, "American Football: How to Play It"; Walter Camp, "Walter Camp's Book of College Sports"; Michael Mandelbaum, "The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, Basketball, and What They See When They Do"; Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, "A Brief History of American Sports"; Melvin Adelman, "A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics"; David Riesman and Reuel Denney, "Football in America: A Study in Culture Diffusion"; Allen Guttmann, "Sports: The First Five Millennia"; The Lost Century of Sports Collection, "The Lost Century of American Football: Reports from the Birth of a Game"; Henry Randall Waite, "Carmina Collegensia: A Complete Collection of the Songs of the American Colleges"; and William Studwell and Bruce Schueneman, "College Fight Songs II: A Supplementary Anthology."

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