Establishing Proper "Athletic Relations": The Nascent SEC and the Formation of College Athletic Conferences

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THE SCHOLAR LOOKING FOR HISTORICAL CONTEXT TO UNDERSTAND why, in 2012, Texas A&M University left its athletic home in the Big 12 Conference to join Auburn University and the University of Alabama in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) should start his search in 1894. Similarly, the Alabamian seeking clarity on why the Iron Bowl (the annual football tilt between Auburn and Alabama) went unplayed between 1907 and 1947 should turn back to the early days of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA). For as this study will demonstrate, the behaviors manifested in today's college athletics are far from new. Rather they have their roots in the establishment of the SIAA (and the Missouri Valley and Big Ten) conference at the turn of the 20th century.

An analysis of early college athletic conferences is particularly pertinent, now. "A System Built on Hypocrisy is Wobbling," the *New York Times* warned of the NCAA and college athletics in August 2014.[1] In addition to legal challenges to amateurism, the memberships of the major, NCAA Division I athletic conferences in the United States have become wildly unstable. Playing the which-school-joined-what-conference game has become increasingly complicated. But here is a partial recounting. In 2010, the Universities of Colorado and Utah jettisoned their old conferences, the Big 12 and Mountain West respectively, in order to join the Pacific 12 (which had been the

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[1] *New York Times,* August 10, 2014.

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Pacific 10 before this change). Then the University of Nebraska left the Big 12 for the Big Ten.[2] Texas A&M University and the University of Missouri subsequently joined the SEC.[3] Baylor University, afraid of being left without sufficient athletic dance partners, threatened legal action to hold the Big 12 together.[4] Later, in September 2011, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) got involved, poaching the University of Pittsburgh and Syracuse University from the Big East Conference. Notre Dame, in its own—always self-important—manner, joined the ACC, too.[5]

So what is happening? A measure of perspective regarding this recent spate of athletic repositioning can be found by examining college athletics during the early 20th century. During that period, university athletic programs established many of the patterns that still reverberate today. This study analyzes the most pressing issues for college athletic conferences during the Progressive Era: setting standards for eligibility (specifically the "one year rule"), establishing suitable "athletic relations," and maintaining racial separation. The last of these causes was the least mentioned, but most deeply ingrained.[6]

STUDYING THE STRUCTURE OF COLLEGE ATHLETICS

Historians, journalists, and sociologists have written plenty about college athletics. The scholar interested in saying something new about college sports history has the pleasure of wading first through

[2] The University of Nebraska's move to the Big Ten was complicated by the fact that Nebraska lost its membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities as it joined its new conference. The Big Ten had previously featured only AAU schools.
[3] The University of Texas' decision to start its own cable television network, The Longhorn Network, also contributed to the split.
[4] *New York Times,* September 3, 2011.
[5] Notre Dame remained a football independent.
[6] Brian M. Ingrassia, "Public Influence inside the College Walls: Progressive Era Universities, Social Scientists, and Intercollegiate Football Reform," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10.1 (January 2011): 59-88; Brian M. Ingrassia, *The Rise of the Gridiron University: Higher Education's Uneasy Alliance with Big-Time Football* (Lawrence, Kan., 2012).

a deep reservoir of popular histories and biographies. Many of these works focus on college football. Sally Jenkin's *The Real All-Americans,* Lars Anderson's *Carlisle vs. Army,* and John J. Miller's *The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football* are three of the most recent of these accessible histories.[7] Academics too have written much about college sport. Two scholars in particular, Ronald Smith and Murray Sperber, have contributed greatly to unearthing the particulars about how athletics and education in the United States intersected.[8] Murray Sperber, for his part, has taken on the daunting and unpopular role of playing chief academic critic of America's sporting landscape. Occasionally in the cross-hairs of public vitriol, Sperber has spent his career unabashedly calling for an overhaul of college athletics.[9] Most recently, Taylor Branch, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian, has taken the lead on criticizing the college athletic structure.[10] None of these scholars, however, spent much time considering how pre-World War II athletic conferences set the current system in motion.

Too much scholarly emphasis has been focused on the NCAA and national trends, and not enough on college conferences when it comes to understanding the development and workings of college athletics.[11] "Progressives believed that modern sport, polit-

[7] Sally Jenkins, *The Real All-Americans* (New York, 2008); Lars Anders, *Carlisle vs. Army: Jim Thorpe, Dwight Eisenhower, Pop Warner, and the Forgotten Story of Football's Greatest Battle* (New York, 2007); John J. Miller, *The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football* (New York, 2011).

[8] Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big Time College Athletics* (New York, 1988); Ronald A. Smith, *Pay for Play: A History of Big-time College Athletic Reform* (Urbana, Ill., 2010).

[9] Murray Sperber, *College Sports Inc.: The Athletic Department vs. The University* (New York, 1990); Murray Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football* (New York, 1993); Murray Sperber, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (New York, 2000).

[10] Taylor Branch, "The Shame of College Sports," *Atlantic Monthly,* <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-college-sports/308643/?single_page=true>, Accessed November 1, 2014; Taylor Branch, *The Cartel: Inside the Rise and Eminent Fall of the NCAA* (E-book, By-Liner, Inc., 2011).

[11] As a sampling of this national focused scholarship, see: Vernon Baxter and Charles Lamber, "The National Collegiate Athletic Association and the Governance of Higher Education," *The Sociological Quarterly* 31.3 (Summer, 1990): 403–21; Arthur A. Fleisher III, Brian L. Goff, and Robert D. Tollison, *The National Collegiate Athletic Association: A Study in Cartel Behavior* (Chicago, 1992); James V. Koch and Wilbert M. Leonard, "A Socio-Economic

ical reform, and rational social action could be used to construct a harmonious national culture," Mark Dyerson has argued.[12] Perhaps, but the playing out of these changes was more often institutional or regional than national during the early stages of college athletics development. The newspaper coverage of the period points to this conference preeminence. In surveying newspapers after 1905 (when the foundations of the NCAA were laid) and before 1940, one sees far more mentions of the Western Intercollegiate Conference (the precursor to the Big Ten), the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (early form of the SEC), and the Missouri Valley Conference than the NCAA. The ratio of citations is roughly 7 to 1 in favor of the conferences.[13] Put simply, the early athletic conferences, not the NCAA, reigned as the preeminent organizations the first 40 years of intercollegiate athletic competition in the United States.

THE BIG THREE

The Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA, formed in 1894), the Western Conference (WC, 1895), and the Missouri Valley Conference (MVC, 1907) came first to the task of organizing college athletics. While the latter still operates under the same name, the former two became the SEC and Big Ten respectively. At the risk of sounding too genealogical, we can look back and see that the SIAA begot the Southern Intercollegiate Conference (SIC) in 1915,

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Analysis: The Development of the College Sports Cartel from Social Movement to Formal Organization," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 37.3 (July 1978): 225–39; Murray Sperber, "Why the NCAA Can't Reform College Athletics," *Academe* 77.1 (Jan-Feb 1991): 13–20; Ying We, "Early NCAA Attempts at the Governance of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, 1968–1973, *Journal of Sports History* 26.3 (Fall 1999): 585–601.

[12] Mark Dyerson, "The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture: American Sport in the 1920s," *Journal of Sport History 16.3* (Winter 1989): 268.

[13] A search of the "ProQuest Historical Newspapers" database between 1905 and 1940 for derivations of the conference names versus the same for the NCAA turned up roughly 41,000 for the former and 6,000 for the latter. This is hardly an exhaustive data set, to be clear. But the rough ratio does give some insight into the public perception of who controlled college athletics during the beginning of the 20th century.

which in turn begot the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in 1932 and the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) in 1953. The Southern Conference (SoCon) emerged from these splits as the conference for smaller southern schools. These fractures (especially between large and small schools) seem almost preordained now, but things did not start out with such divisions. The SIAA and its offspring covered the territory of the former Confederacy, and a bit more. Racial segregation reigned firmly here until the 1960s, and this segregated norm provided an important bond linking white schools. The purpose of the SIAA was Progressive in nature. The 1895 constitution for the body put it plainly: "Its object [of the SIAA] shall be the development and purification of college athletics through the South."[14] The membership of the SIAA ebbed and flowed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Member schools included large state institutions such as Alabama, Auburn, Texas, Louisiana State, Tennessee, and Mississippi as well as smaller institutions such as Sewanee, Cumberland, Mercer, and Birmingham-Southern. All told more than 30 schools held membership in the SIAA at one time or another between 1895 and 1922.[15]

The Western Conference would eventually become known as the Big Ten. Organizing athletics in the "Middle West," the Big Ten originally brought together the Universities of Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois, Northwestern, Wisconsin, Purdue, and Chicago. Indiana, Iowa, Ohio State joined in 1912.[16] The Missouri Valley Conference organized last of the big three, in 1907. The MVC began with Iowa (which would almost immediately leave for the Big 10), Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Drake, Washington University of St. Louis, and Iowa State. William J. Monilaw, the football coach at the University of Missouri, understood the new league, in 1908, as just the latest layer of control to be hoisted upon the athletes of the Plains States.

[14] SIAA, *Southern Inter-Collegiate Athletic Association* (Athens, Ga., 1895), 3.
[15] Roger Saylor, "Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association," *College Football Historical Society Newsletter* 6.2 (February 1993): 13–15.
[16] Charles H. Martin, "The Color Line in Midwestern College Sports, 1890–1960," *Indiana Magazine of History* 98.2 (June 2002): 85–112.

"Three distinct lines of organization are developing," Coach Monilaw wrote. The state associations governing high school sports came first, then state bodies emerged to support small colleges. The Missouri Valley Conference lastly brought order to the larger universities of the area, Monilaw explained, with Kansas City serving as the "hub of the wheel."[17]

TO CONTROL, PRESERVE, AND PROMOTE

When assessing the significance of early athletic conferences, one inevitably becomes tangled in discussions of amateurism and eligibility standards. Defining who could and who could not play was the first fundamental role of the SIAA, the Western Conference, and the MVC. The SIAA determined in 1895 that no student would be allowed to compete for more than five seasons, and that only "bona fide" students could take to the fields or courts of competition for their schools.[18] The conferences, not the NCAA or AAU, joined individual athletic programs at the forefront in these first struggles over eligibility, to keep the evils of professionalism out, and to make sure that only serious students could play.

Nineteenth-century sports journalists regularly criticized college athletics as being out of control—just as the muckrakers focused on the excesses of corporations and financiers. "It would seem that the athletics in the South, both in and out of the Association, are in a hopeless muddle," a concerned reporter editorialized in 1899.[19] Few sportswriters offered specific plans to reform college athletics, but they professed that they could certainly observe that things were in need of reform. The University of Alabama, representative of other "big-time" sports schools, responded to both internal and external pressure by forming an association to oversee their athletic program. The Athletic Association of the University of Alabama formed in

[17] William J. Monilaw, "Football in the Missouri Valley," *Baseball Magazine* 2.1 (November 1908): 49–52.
[18] *Southern Inter-Collegiate Athletic Association,* 5-6.
[19] *Outing* 34.2 (July 1899): 433.

1897 to "promote, direct, and have general control of athletics at the University of Alabama."[20] Similar organizations rose up at other schools as intercollegiate competition became the norm. Most southern universities joined athletic conferences in the quest to curb the excesses of college athletics and reign in the negative influences.

Schools selected faculty representatives to be their main contact points with the newly emerging athletic conferences. For the University of Alabama, Eugene Allen Smith, a highly esteemed geologist, took on the task at the beginning of the 20th century. Smith wrote hundreds of letters regarding athletics at his university. He negotiated with coaches (he tried to hire John Heisman but didn't offer enough money), responded to queries from SIAA officials, and helped set up games and matches with other universities.[21] But more than anything else, Smith dealt with eligibility issues. He defended his athletes against charges of professionalism—especially when rival Auburn University brought the accusations. And, forced to sign off on the eligibility of his own athletes each semester, Smith wrote constantly to the SIAA requesting updated forms. "The time is drawing near when I shall have to send in the certificates of our base ball candidates," Smith wrote to a SIAA Vice President in 1917, "I have not yet received the latest edition of these blanks [forms] which take account of the legislation of the last meeting…"[22] It's a wonder that Smith found time to research and teach amidst the bureaucratic workload he faced as a leader of intercollegiate sport at his university.

The editors of *Outing* harped particularly on southern universities' rules of eligibility at the turn of the century. Considering the 1900 season: "Unless more honesty of purpose is shown pretty soon in Southern football, we shall be compelled to ignore the entire field in our annual reviews." This threat of non-coverage was a shallow one. Reporters had long made similar threats to ignore prize-fighting,

[20] AAUA, *Constitution, Athletic Association of the University of Alabama* (University of Alabama, 1897). Document held in UA's University Archives.
[21] E.A. Smith to John Heisman, November 4, 1902, University of Alabama Archives.
[22] E.A. Smith to Edward Holmes, March 13, 1917, University of Alabama Archives.

only to provide lavish coverage all the while metaphorically holding their noses and feigning disgust at the entertainment appetites of the public masses. Concerns regarding how players came and went from their universities, however, were valid ones. "At Virginia," the *Outing* scribe continued, "there is nothing to prevent a man entering the university (without examination) playing all season and leaving immediately on its close, as happened this year at Texas [...] Southern athletics need a good stirring up and a congress of faculties to agree on such rules as we have in the North—and to subsequently enforce them."[23] Aside from the sectional jab, the coverage pointed to the brewing controversy over the "one year rule." This single rule would indeed go a long way towards stemming the tide of non-student athletes, inhibiting professional incentives, and (and this must not be overlooked) towards widening the chasm between universities for whites and those for black students.

THE ONE YEAR RULE

The one year rule mandated that a student could not participate in intercollegiate athletics until he (and intercollegiate athletics were indeed limited to men at this point) had completed one year of studies, in good standing, at his university. The rule was proposed as a solution to college athletes jumping from one school to the next, and as a way to stop students from staying in school only until the spring sports had ended. Conferences large and small debated the one year rule, coming to a variety of conclusions about its usefulness. The Ohio Inter-Collegiate Athletic Association adopted the one year rule in 1906.[24] The leaders of the SIAA, Big Ten and MVC began pushing for the rule at roughly the same time. Not all conferences and schools came around. The Southwestern Conference, for example, composed mostly of Texas universities, rejected the idea of banning freshman participation.

[23] *Outing* 37.5 (February 1900): 616.
[24] Marc Horger, "Basketball and Athletic Control at Oberlin College, 1896–1915," *Journal of Sport History* 23.3 (Fall 1996): 274.

The one year rule clearly benefited larger schools. It favored the athletic program that could compete and win with only their upper classmen. These were athletic *programs*, well stocked from year-to-year with capable athletes. The one year rule also demanded an investment from universities, although the acceptability of athletic scholarships was far from determined at this time. The NCAA would not officially sanction athletic scholarships until 1956. The push to make freshmen ineligible for athletic competition really heated up after 1910. The big three conferences had all been established by this point for several years. Additionally, college football had survived its "death harvest" years and had emerged as a newly popular game.[25]

The Western Conference (Big Ten) began hedging towards the one year rule beginning in 1905.[26] The move was not without controversy. The rule so tipped the scales of power that the University of Michigan withdrew from the conference in 1908 in opposition to the new policy.[27] The Missouri Valley Conference followed the Big Ten and overhauled its rules 1910. At a meeting primarily focused on football competition, Missouri Valley Conference members (not including Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa State, and Drake, who did not attend) clamped down on what many perceived to be the excesses of the game. In the course of a single meeting an impressive slate of changes were proposed, debated, and agreed upon. The MVC mandated that member schools could not pay coaches, provide training tables for players, or participate in the popular (and lucrative) Thanksgiving Day games.[28] Conference leaders also agreed that "freshman shall be limited to competing in athletic events in their own school."[29] While this sounded definitive, the decision marked the beginning of a decade-long debate over eligibility in major college athletics—once again particularly pertaining to football.

[25] See Miller, *The Big Scrum.*
[26] *Washington Post,* September 17, 1905.
[27] *Chicago Daily Tribune,* August 30, 1907; Ratermann, *The Big Ten,* 45.
[28] We can assume that training tables here refer to the providing of meals, separate from the rest of the student body, for athletes.
[29] *Los Angeles Times,* April 20, 1910.

The one year rule had its opponents. "Normal schools" and other smaller, junior institutions found it difficult to conceive of competing without first year players. Simple numbers determined that freshmen mattered more at these institutions. But not all opponents of the one year rule were "have nots." The University of Southern California, already an established West Coast football power, withdrew in 1915 from the Southern California Conference over eligibility rules. "We are not going to be beaten … when we have sensational players in the bleachers," USC's graduate manager (read: coach) explained.[30]

The universities of the South, especially those in the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association, argued for more than a decade over the implementation of the one year rule. Vanderbilt and Sewanee Universities took the lead in opposing the ban on freshman players. Given the smaller size of these institutions compared to the larger state schools they often competed against, this stand made sense.

Eventually, it was this debate over eligibility that fractured the SIAA. In 1915, a handful of the largest members of the SIAA banded together to form the Southern Intercollegiate Conference (SIC). SIC founding members included Auburn, Clemson, Georgia, Georgia Tech, Kentucky, Mississippi State, South Carolina, and Tennessee.[31] The debate over the one year rule only intensified after the formation of the SIC. In a move anathema to 21st century conceptions of athletic conference membership, early athletic conferences did not demand membership monogamy. Thus many southern schools kept membership in the SIAA even as they joined the SIC. Among the issues left untouched by conference membership before 1920 was scheduling. So the University of Georgia, for example, joined the SIC, maintained ties with the SIAA, and still picked and chose where it wanted to play in a given year. Gradually, though, the pressure applied by conferences to produce uniform behavior and rules among their members increased. In 1916, the SIC announced

[30] *Los Angeles Times,* December 13, 1914.
[31] Roger Saylor, "Southern Intercollegiate Conference," *College Football Historical Society Newsletter* 6.4 (August 1993): 6.

officially that it would strictly observe the one year rule.[32] Eligibility rules would define the new conference.

LIMITING "ATHLETIC RELATIONS"

More than just advocating for the one year rule, SIC members schools began to think more aggressively about mandating compliance to their conference doctrines than the SIAA ever had. The SIAA had posited and postured; it did not enforce most of its suggestions. The new SIC, on the other hand, proposed serious penalties for ignoring the one year rule. Effective January 1, 1917 (giving southern schools one year to fall in line), the SIC pledged to forbid its members from "playing with non-members eligible for membership," who did not embrace the one year rule.[33]

It was a threat, albeit a difficult one to enforce, of exclusion. The SIC was boldly suggesting that it would attempt to prohibit, for example, a game between Auburn University (a supporter of the one year rule) and the University of Alabama (a temporary rejecter of the freshman ban). Calling the rule dispute a fatiguing "bugbear," the *Atlanta Constitution* provided a telling description of the separation brewing among southern collegiate athletic programs. Members of the new SIC, the *Constitution* warned, would "refuse to have athletic relations with any colleges outside the conference that do not enforce the one-year rule."[34] The semantics here matter. "Athletic relations" denoted something deeper than a simple refusal to play a game versus another school. There would be a severing of, well, a relationship.

Finding proper and profitable athletic relations was a key concern among Progressive Era universities. Partnerships were debated, tried, and often terminated. The University of Georgia and Georgia Tech split in 1919, refusing to meet for athletic competition. The University of Virginia and Georgetown had declared in 1905 that they

[32] *Sporting Life,* February 5, 1916.
[33] *Atlanta Constitution,* January 30, 1916.
[34] *Atlanta Constitution,* January 26, 1916.

would no longer meet in athletic contests; then they patched things up.[35] The President of Princeton University's athletic board brought the topic of athletic relations to his faculty in 1926. "The Board voted unanimously to sever athletic relations with Harvard University in all sports," the Harvard *Crimson* reported. "We have been forced to the convention that it is impossible at present to expect from athletic competition with Harvard that spirit of cordial good will between undergraduates of two universities…"[36] That "athletic relations" were to be taken seriously and were newsworthy is obvious from these and countless other similar newspaper stories from the period.

The establishment and revocation of athletic relations happened with almost comedic frequency during this period. The sports historian attempting to track all the athletic feuds between college athletic programs during the Progressive Era would have a near-impossible task. Occasionally the reports were positive ("Athletic relations have been maintained with the Universities of Minnesota, Michigan, etc," reported the *University of South Dakota Bulletin* in 1916), but more often the discussion of the athletic relations turned snippy and exclusionary.[37] Sometimes the schools involved were athletic heavyweights. The Universities of Virginia and North Carolina, for example, discussed severing athletic ties in 1921 due to a disagreement of eligibility standards. In other instances, however, the athletic teams in question were hardly worthy of the shunning they received. In 1906 New York University broke off athletic relations with Trinity College over dirty play.[38] Did anyone, beyond the two schools themselves, really care? It's doubtful, but regardless of their size and prestige, universities took very seriously the question of which schools they would compete against.

The athletic director of the University of Iowa, in 1908, attempted to explain the preoccupation with finding suitable athletic partners.

[35] *Washington Post,* February 21, 1905; *Atlanta Constitution,* May 23, 1919.
[36] *Harvard Crimson,* November 11, 1926.
[37] *The University of South Dakota Bulletin,* Ser 16, no. 6, 1916.
[38] University of North Carolina, *The Alumni Review* 10.3 (1921): 77-78; New York University, *The Triangle* 12 (1905-1906): 24.

"In order that a man shall benefit by a contests, it must be a real contests, between men whose strength is comparable," the A.D. stated in an address entitled "Intercollegiate Relations in Athletic Contests." "If contests are held with institutions of equal rank, they will be carried out on a broader basis and with a manlier spirit," the professor concluded. In contrast, experiments with competing against smaller universities [read: less prestigious universities], had inevitably been characterized by "strained and bitter" feelings.[39] The explanation emphasized balance, decorum, and regulation in rapidly changing times.

The struggle over the one year rule and the establishment of the SIC left Vanderbilt, Sewanee University, the University of Alabama, Louisiana State University, and other institutions, isolated from their athletic counterparts. For some schools the exile was temporary. Georgia and Auburn, both of which had withdrawn from the SIAA in protest of the impending one year rule before 1915, came quickly back into the fold when the SIC formed. Vanderbilt, Sewanee, Alabama, and LSU held out longer, leading the push against the one year rule in 1916 and 1917.[40] Vanderbilt University in particular made the case that it possessed all the key qualities a model southern institution should pursue. In a lengthy essay in its series on American universities, *Outing* (much more a venue for editorializing about sports than simply reporting on it) called Vanderbilt "A University of the New South." Vanderbilt did not have the numbers of some other colleges, but its men came from good "Southern stock, the real blood and bone of those who built the South, and who at the birth of the Confederacy gave all they had to the cause because they believed it to be right." Furthermore, Vanderbilt fought against professionalism in college athletics and refused to give athletic scholarships. And of the one year rule, Vanderbilt only "because of the comparatively small enrollment" played freshman. But the freshman that did play at Vanderbilt did not descend upon campus only to play, they were required to enter the university with "fourteen Carnegie units"

[39] *Iowa Alumnus* 6 (1908-1909): 140-41.
[40] *Atlanta Constitution,* December 12, 1915; *Sporting Life* 65.26 (August 28, 1915): 4.

before they could take to the field or track or court.[41] Vanderbilt made some headway in its push for reasonable standards regarding freshman eligibility—at least temporarily. The SIAA considered allowing schools with fewer than 400 students to be exempted from the one year rule. Unfortunately for Vanderbilt, representatives from the larger southern institutions nixed the loophole.[42] Thus when it came to considering athletic relations between schools as diverse as Vanderbilt, the University of Georgia, and Furman, the question became, was there room for differences of opinion when it came to eligibility and the one year rule?

By the 1921 football season, the SIC had become the athletic conference of the South's largest universities and, not coincidentally, those schools that had adopted the one year rule. The SIC, which would eventually spawn the SEC and ACC, included all the traditional (and future) southern athletic powers. Vanderbilt, LSU and Alabama gave way on their commitment to utilizing freshman and joined the larger league. Left behind in the SIAA were the smaller colleges. Schools such as Furman, Louisiana Tech, and Wofford continued under the SIAA umbrella until World War II disrupted college athletics once again.

Simply joining the SIC, however, did not necessarily mean that rosy "athletic relations" had been restored. The Universities of Alabama and Auburn, even as conference-mates, refused to play each other for forty years. The Iron Bowl—the schools' annual football game—went uncontested from 1907-1947. A combination of class tensions (the University of Alabama as the school for wealthier students and Auburn for the rural and working class), violence on the football field, and constant charges of professionalism kept Alabama's two major universities athletically fractured for four decades.[43] The feud

41 *Outing* 44.3 (June 1914): 320–31.

42 Eugene A. Smith to Henry Dougherty (editor *Knoxville Sentinel*), January 6, 1914, University of Alabama Archives, Hoole Special Collections Library, Tuscalooa.

43 For more on the Alabama-Auburn rivalry, see: Andrew Doyle, "Everybody Concerned Looks Ridiculous: Alabama, Auburn, and the Politics of College Football, 1893-1948," *North American Society for Sport History, Proceedings and Newsletter* (1997) 26; Paul Hemphill, *A Tiger Walk through History: The Complete Story of Auburn Football from 1892 to the Tuberville Era* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2008).

demonstrated the complexities of the athletic relations equation during the period.

Many charitable organizations in the state, such as the Robert E. Lee foundation, attempted to patch up the rift between Alabama's two major universities in order that the profitable annual football games could resume. Birmingham officials also attempted to mediate, but to little avail. Hostility and skepticism kept the universities apart. The debate over athletic relations between the University of Alabama and Auburn University eventually went all the way up the administrative ladder. Alabama President George Denny wrote to his counterpart, Auburn's President Spright Dowell, on the matter, in 1923. The fact that the two corresponded was not unusual, but the tone of the 1923 communication is particularly informative regarding the perceived risks and possibilities of resuming athletic relations. "I have the impression that your athletic authorities have not favored any renewal of athletic relations," Denny wrote. "Of course, if there is no embarrassment whatever from your point of view in arranging the game and if it is your wish to arrange it, I stand ready to cooperate," the University of Alabama president wrote hesitantly. Denny then concluded with a tentative plea: "The sole object of this letter is to assure you that I want to cooperate and act jointly, and without embarrassment to anyone concerned. *Believe me.*"[44] Spright and Auburn University, apparently, did not buy what Denny was selling. Denny received no reply to his diplomatic entreaty.

CONFERENCES, ELIGIBILITY, AND RACE

While debates over the one year rule raged, none of the schools of the South with white students, whether a part of the SIAA or the SIC or existing as one of the schools that bounced between the various other smaller conferences that came and went between 1894 and 1920, played against schools with African American students. In other parts of the country, though, college football experienced periodic

[44] George H. Denny to Spright Dowell, August 23, 1923, University of Alabama Archives. Italics added for emphasis.

integration. Black players were featured in the lineups of schools such as Amherst, Harvard, Michigan, and Nebraska.[45] Still, the vast majority of African American football players during this period played at black colleges. The situation was almost the exact opposite as that in baseball, where roster integration was mostly forbidden but all-black squads occasionally met their all-white counterparts.[46]

Black college football teams had organized and competed on a similar chronological trajectory as their white counterparts.[47] Racial separation of football programs was maintained through the precise but often unspoken agreements that made up the patchwork quilt of Jim Crow segregation. Vagrancy laws and *Plessy v. Ferguson* facilities were complimented by universally understood customs and norms. In that world, as well as above the Mason Dixon line, the one year rule provided an official piece of "legislation" that confirmed segregated norms. The formation of athletic conferences also formalized separation. The one year rule itself did not pertain primarily to race, but one could reasonable contend that the racially exclusionary "benefits" of the clause were duly noted.

Most schools today classified as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) began as "normal schools." These normal schools allowed African Americans access to education, but of a variety not exactly matching that of a full-fledged university. The curriculum at black serving institutions usually focused on preparing teachers and spanned two years rather than four. Contemporaries of the normal schools referred to the focus of the black colleges as "industrial," and many race reformers praised the schools for providing practical, no-frills educational opportunities.[48] Since many black

[45] Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete,1619-1918* (New York, 1988), 90-91.

[46] There were some exceptions to this segregation pattern in baseball, most notably Moses Fleetwood Walker. See, David Zang, *Fleet Walker's Divided Heart: The Life of Baseball's First Black Major Leaguer* (Lincoln, Neb., 1995); Ryan Swanson, *When Baseball Went White: Reconstruction, Reconciliation, and the Dream of a "National Pastime"* (Lincoln, Neb., 2014).

[47] Rover B. Saylor, "Black College Football," *College Football Historical Society Newsletter* 13.3 (May 2000): 4–6.

[48] Tilden J. LeMelle, "The HBCU: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *Education* 123.1 (Fall 2002): 190–96.

institutions featured two year programs, however, the very structure of these schools butted up against increasing calls to embrace the one year rule. Take away one year and the black college—Hampton, Southern, and Howard among them—would have been forced to roll over its athletic rosters every year. This was impractical.

College playbooks, while far from the mammoth and complex tomes they are today, took time to learn. When Walter Camp gave a seminar on the tactics of football in 1900, he wowed his audience with explanations of concealed ball plays, double and triple passes, and "criss-crosses."[49] Since high school football was still developing, many players continued learning the intricacies of the game in college. Thus the one year rule, and the commitment by an increasing number of schools to play only other schools that honored it, served also as a statement that, say, the University of South Carolina would not play Prairie View A&M—both due to the racial climate of the country as well as the technicalities of the emerging athletic legal code. The one year rule added de jure segregation to de facto realities.

The fact that the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) was established in 1912, in the midst of the push for the one year rule, was not a coincidence. Rather, founding members Hampton, Howard, Lincoln, Shaw and Virginia Union Universities were responding to an increasingly hostile climate in the college athletic world. The formation of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (1912 [not to be confused with the SIAA]), Southwestern Athletic Conference (1920), and Midwestern Athletic Association (1926), all composed solely of schools for African Americans, demonstrated further that the message of the one year rule concerned more than stopping professionalism and shoring up eligibility requirements. Racial segregation and eligibility rules were intertwined; both figured prominently into the agendas of early athletic conferences in the United States.

[49] Walter Camp, "A Symposium of Football Methods and Development in Tactics," *Outing* 37.2 (November 1900): 171-76.

The CIAA, for its part, focused on enforcing reasonable eligibility rules, but not the one year rule. The CIAA's bylaws clearly stated that the cutoff for a new student wanting to participate in athletics was not a year in residence but rather a different but still perfectly defensible standard: "No new student shall participate in intercollegiate athletics who does not matriculate at the beginning of the quarter in which the sport is carried on."[50] The rule was fair, but it added another level of separation between white and black institutions of higher education.

ENFORCING NEW RULES

The quest to organize athletics through conferences such as the SIAA, SIC, Western Conference, and MVC produced more declarations of proper decorum than enforceable statutes. To be clear, the conferences were the leaders in reform and regulation, but they were still limited. By 1910, many sportswriters and reformers had heard enough about rule adoptions and changes. Enforcement reigned as the real challenge. "There was nothing in making further rules but futility and increased opportunity for evasions and deceit," declared the *Ohio Report on Athletics*. "For over thirty years the Western Conference, the Big Ten, the Ohio Conference, and other conferences have been making rules and drawing up codes…Is not the futility of rules, gentlemen's agreements, sportsmanship codes, thus incontrovertibly shown?"[51]

Conferences had few concrete tools at their disposal to ensure that ideas of reform were translated into reality. In a few notable examples, each of the big three early athletic conferences attempted to discipline one of its members for treading upon eligibility rules. In 1922 the SIC banned two football players from competing for the University of Florida. The players, conference officials had learned,

[50] Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association, *CIAA Bulletin, 1934 with Proceedings of the 23rd Annual Meeting* (1934), 45.
[51] C.W. Savage, "The Ohio Report on Athletics," *The Journal of Higher Education* 2.6 (June 1930): 331.

had competed for more than four years and at multiple universities. The SIC stopped short, however, of punishing Florida for using illegal players. "Florida acted in good faith in playing these men," it was reported in explanation for why the University escaped any attempt at disciplinary action from the conference.[52] The blame-shift suggested that the SIC hesitated to punish a school when an athlete could be substituted.

The schools retained most of the power. Considering once again the modern context for this study, the major athletic universities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries displayed a positively modern lack of allegiance to their conferences. Schools jumped, and came and went when they didn't like the decisions of their conference officials. In the Big Ten, an attempt to hold Michigan to the one year rule led the university withdrawing from the conference, for nearly a decade, altogether. The "Big Nine" did not have the same cache as the "Big Ten," and the loss of Michigan meant losing the conference's biggest attraction for a sustained period.[53] Similarly, when the Southwestern Conference decided in 1919 to let the restriction on freshman participation lapse, the University of Oklahoma almost immediately bolted for the Missouri Valley Conference.[54]

"Whitewashing" athletes became a necessary tool for allowing athletic conferences to reverse their penalties—to offer a mea-culpa of sorts to jilted conference-members. The Missouri Valley Conference articulated its whitewashing rules in 1912, suggesting that a sullied athlete (suspected of professionalism or gambling, etc) submit "a full statement of his history as a participant in sport, making full disclosures of all forms of professionalism with which he has been tainted."[55] A special committee then convened to hear the whitewash cases. The reality of athletic conferences taking on the role of reestablishing an athlete's acceptability, of extending "grace" to one previously regarded as tainted, again highlighted the attempts by conferences to regulate and control college sports.

[52] *Christian Science Monitor,* December 11, 1922.
[53] *Washington Post,* June 10, 1917.
[54] *Christian Science Monitor,* February 20, 1919.
[55] *New York Times,* March 10, 1912.

Questions regarding eligibility, whitewashing, rule enforcement and professionalism all merged together in regards to the issue of summer baseball. This summer baseball activity, taking place off university grounds when schools were not in session, complicated the task of regulating the college athlete. Many college athletes made it their summer job during this period to play baseball for a semi-professional team. The pay proved attractive and the "work" beat most alternatives available to college students. Attempting to control this activity forced the athletic conferences to play both detective and word smith. Who had played where, and under what name? Exactly how was the compensation classified—as a salary, stipend, living expenses? The conferences tried to answer these questions, as did the NCAA and AAU (most famously in the case of Olympic champion Jim Thorpe).[56] Rarely though did the facts emerge easily. Southern California schools took the lead in arguing for a much more nuanced stand on the issue of summer baseball than their eastern counterparts had previously articulated on similar eligibility issues. One could be "'pro' in one sport" and "'amateur' in another," one California conference determined.[57] By the 1920s a convoluted standard on summer baseball had developed. College athletes could play summer baseball if they had the permission of their school's athletic director. Assuming the student would accept this procedural hoop, college students were allowed to collect anywhere from expense money to $7 per day for their play.[58] The policy solved little. College athletes still took baseball positions and many simply used different names or lied about their earnings. Again, regulation amidst new realities proved difficult.

THEN AND NOW...

The first college athletic conferences tried to regulate athletic competition and behavior of college athletes. In keeping with the

[56] Benjamin Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (New Jersey, 2009), 206–07.
[57] *Los Angeles Times,* December 13, 1914.
[58] *Atlanta Constitution,* December 10, 1922.

Progressive times, the new conferences sought to protect traditional values amidst new and constantly evolving circumstances. Athletic relations and eligibility mattered most. The pervasive struggle over eligibility demonstrated that college athletics never enjoyed a halcyon period of widespread equality and lack of strife. Rather schools argued incessantly about proper athletic relations. They divided themselves up by region, size, and race. The one year rule codified many divides.

The historical pattern is clear. College athletic conferences emerged in the late 19th century and in order to cement the divisions between different types of universities. The development of the CIAA and other conferences for schools that served African American students followed the rise of the SIAA, Big Ten, and MVC. Then, even after the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation in the 1960s, athletics remained—to one significant extent—segregated. HBCUs played separate from other universities. Even as of 2014, there is one only exception to this athletic conference-segregation at the NCAA's highest level. Tennessee State University, an HBCU, competes in the Ohio Valley Conference. All other NCAA Division I HBCUs compete in the all-HBCU Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference or Southwestern Athletic Conference.

Going forward, Auburn University and the University of Alabama, as part of the powerful and profitable Southeastern Conference, are poised to further separate themselves from most other university athletic programs. The decisions by the NCAA board of governors in 2014 to give the "Big 5" conferences—the ACC, Big 12, Big Ten, Pacific 12, and SEC—increased autonomy will create new divisions.[59] While certainly the stakes are different from those of the early twentieth century and the Jim Crow era, the pattern of athletic conferences serving to define proper athletic relations seems destined to continue.

59 *Washington Post,* August 7, 2014.