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A-HED

How Players at MIT Engineered a Football Team

This Season, the Engineers Are Going to Playoffs, but They Once Competed in Hand-Me-Downs



The offensive line and tight ends on MIT's first club football team in 1978 pose for a team photo. *WALTER CROSBY*

By **BEN COHEN**

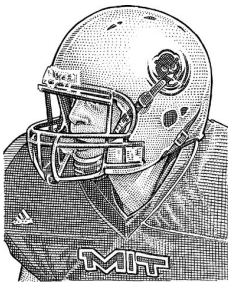
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CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—In the 1970s, on this campus known for scientific innovation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology students engineered a rather unlikely experiment: a football team.

MIT had no intercollegiate football squad at the time. The student body in 1901 voted 119-117 to discontinue it. So one day in 1978, a group of MIT students huddled and created a team that would play its first game that fall. No one else at the school had any clue.

There were times when fielding a football team at MIT seemed like rocket science. The students wore uniforms that once belonged to another college. They borrowed their playbook from a local high school. They were known as both the Beavers and the Engineers. Either way, they lost every game they played that year, and even one they didn't play.

But these football forefathers, who are nowhere to be found in MIT's record books, are now taking their victory



lap. The student club they created eventually became a university-run varsity team. This season, 36 years after winning no games, the Engineers are undefeated and will make their first appearance in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division III playoffs on Saturday.

Art Aaron enrolled at MIT when the only competitive football there was played in an intramural league. The games were flag football, but the fraternity members of Sigma Alpha Epsilon and Lambda Chi Alpha would beat each other up when they took the field.

"It's a bit of an oxymoron," said Mr. Aaron, a defensive end on the 1978 team, "but we were two of the jock fraternities at MIT."

They decided that MIT should play someone other than MIT. Bruce Wrobel, the starting quarterback, plastered campus with posters for a potential student-run squad, known in college sports as a club-level team. More than 40 guys showed up for the first meeting. He and his teammates then attended a club-football convention and made deals to play seven games—six on the road and one on campus. They billed it as "MIT's first home football game in 75 years." Mr. Wrobel died in 2013.



MIT's first club football team also inspired a makeshift marching band that played during the team's first home game in 1978. *TOM GAUL*

The players had another issue to tackle: None of MIT's administrators knew they had invented a football team.

Soon, the club officers were summoned to a meeting with then-MIT President Jerry Wiesner, a pipe-smoking scientist who had advised President John F. Kennedy on nuclear disarmament. When it came to MIT football, though, the players say he punted. Dr. Wiesner died in 1994.

"For a guy who...had spent most of his life figuring out how to prevent the world from blowing itself up, he was not quite sure what to do with us," said Walter Crosby, MIT's center, who has written a history of the team's early years.

The players were passed off to MIT's athletic board. Jack Barry, an assistant athletic director, recommended that MIT support the club for at least one

season. “The cry for football has been surfacing every few years,” Mr. Barry wrote in a 1978 letter, “and will continue to do so until it is clear that football is or is not for MIT.” Mr. Barry died in 1999.

The team’s interest in football wasn’t academic, but there was still something nerdy about it. MIT students prided themselves on “hacks”—pranks that showed how smart they were—and a football team fit that model. “You had to justify it as a double-reverse hack,” said Jay Glass, now a NASA researcher, who covered the team for MIT’s newspaper. “It was a hack on the university itself.”

The players calculated a solution for every problem that season. They didn’t have any money, so they refereed intramural games, sold hot dogs, painted hurdles for track meets, took grants from the school and sneaked loans from their fraternity budgets. “You name it, we were doing it,” said Keith Therrien, a nose guard on that team.

Photos: From 1978, the Birth of a Team »

Memorabilia from the MIT Engineers’ opening season.



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MIT’s program for its first home football game in decades, against Siena College on Oct. 28, 1978.
WALTER CROSBY

They also needed jerseys. As it happened, the Rochester Institute of Technology had recently dropped its football team, so Mr. Crosby purchased RIT’s white tops and orange pants for MIT, which wears red and gray. “Not quite the school colors,” said Libby Guethlein, who was a team statistician. “But they were uniforms.”

The rest of MIT wasn’t prepared, either. There were no goal posts on campus. The team had to practice on a small patch of grass. Even people there weren’t aware the school was playing college football. “Knew nothing about it, I’m afraid,” MIT linguistics professor Noam Chomsky said in an email.

MIT’s first five games in 1978 were on the road. But it only played four of them. The team canceled a trip to Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, which still counts the game as a forfeit win. For the other games, all of which turned out to

be losses, the players loaded onto team buses at dawn for long road trips. “I’m sure they thought: Who are these geeks?” said linebacker Gary Spletter. “We all knew we were probably going to get creamed.”

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But something strange happened: MIT’s football team wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t blown out of any game and then improved as the season went on. Everything was coming together in time for its lone home game, against Siena (N.Y.) College.

The school built football uprights atop its soccer nets. The team printed a program with advertisements,

including one from a fraternity that promised a postgame party with 14 kegs.

According to people who were at the game, and accounts in the student newspaper, cheerleaders led a standing-room-only crowd in spelling out “Massachusetts Institute of Technology.” The marching band, despite rumors it would consist of kazoos, blared the national anthem and chanted:

“Cosine, secant, tangent, sine

3 point 14159!

Integral, radical, mu, DV

Slip stick, slide rule, M-I-T!”

Siena spoiled the homecoming with a 30-14 win. But the visiting players weren’t expecting the wild atmosphere. “I remember feeling like we were part of something special,” said Siena wide receiver Timothy Lange.

The football club survived that season. Dwight Smith, an assistant coach, was promoted and remained MIT’s head coach for 30 years. The Engineers scored new uniforms in their proper school colors. They got their first victory in 1979 and went 6-1 the next year.

According to MIT’s record book, though, the football team was officially on hiatus until the school reinstated the varsity team in 1988. But the significance of that first club team isn’t lost on campus. “They deserve a lot of credit for where we are today,” MIT President L. Rafael Reif said.

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