

Point of View

By Frederick Jackson Turner

'To the Alumni on Football'



THE IMPORTANCE OF ATHLETICS in university life is recognized by everybody. The only question is how to keep the system clean and in right relation to the purpose of the university.

Before the Civil War, athletics were but slightly known in American colleges. "Noble athletic sports," wrote Edward Everett in 1856, "manly out-door exercises, which strengthen the body and bring man into a generous and exhilarating communion with nature, are too little cultivated in town or country."

Since then the pendulum has swung far in the other direction. The gospel of the strenuous life is now ascendant, and there is less danger that we shall have pale and ascetic students in their cloisters, lacking a physical basis for the intellectual life.

Fierce college rivalry, the development of the coach, the production of experts fighting for victory on the football field have shifted the problem. As a result of specialization, new dangers to the welfare of college life have appeared. We now face conditions produced by these great waves of excitement raised by the struggle for college championship. The popular interest in victory has transformed college athletics. The ideal of widespread sport among students generally is replaced by the ideal of collecting from all over the country a winning aggregation. There is an increasing tendency for the college student to take his exercise vicariously; to turn over the athletic field and athletic activities to a few highly developed gladiators, fighting for the honor of the college in a game in which the average undergraduate has no share, unless it be to aid in organized cheering on the bleachers, in the midst of a vast crowd drawn by the love of a spectacle. For over two months of the college year, the interest of the undergraduate is dominated by football. So fierce is the rivalry, so well-disciplined is the excitement, that it is almost disloyalty to the college not to give one's self up to the prevailing interest. Enthusiastic alumni, carried away by the desire to see the college victorious and in violation of solemn agreements between the colleges, in violation of the certification which the player must make, and the faculty endorse, collect or subscribe funds to maintain in college not the lad whose abilities mark him out for a career of scholarship and service to the state, but the athlete, whose prowess will help to make a winning team. The football giant is the Hero. The press exploit his weight and his features in the sporting column. The high-school boy is breathless over his greatness. The absurd idea spreads among students that football is the test of the excellence of a university and the proper means of advertising it. Human values are put in wrong



ILLUSTRATION FOR THE CHRONICLE BY TERRY SMITH

perspective, and the fundamental purpose of the university is lost sight of. College ideals are distorted, while the high schools imitate and exaggerate the evils of the situation among the younger generation.

No one doubts that the "major sports," like deep-sea sailing or hunting big game, have the touch of danger, the call to courage, that meets a response in American character. But when the gladiators fought lions in the Roman arena, the vast populace which filled the Colosseum and shouted itself hoarse at the spectacle was getting precious little exercise and was developing its courage in very doubtful fashion. So also the undergraduate on the bleachers shouts for an eleven which is not an outgrowth of normal athletic life in the university but largely brought in to win games.

Football has been passing away from the position of a game played by the undergraduates as a general sport on their own grounds. It has become a business, carried on far too often by professionals, supported by levies on the public, bringing in vast gate receipts, demoralizing student ethics, and confusing the ideals of sport, manliness, and decency. Coaches and managers scour the country for material. Faculties are kept busy playing a game of hide and seek with the man who sells his athletic skill for personal gain, and who pretends to uphold the honor of the university. The decent men of

the elevens, for thank God they still exist! play side by side with the professional, and obscure the moral wrong of it all. Faculties are deceived into certifying the eligibility of mercenaries and the faculty cloak is made to cover the evil practices. It has become almost impossible to prevent the importation of professional athletes, whose interest is to make their football skill pay, and for whom misguided enthusiasts outside of the college furnish the funds for support. The public has pushed its influence inside the college walls, and is demoralizing student sentiment, exalting fictitious heroes, condoning brutality, setting up false ideas of the true honor of a university, and making it impossible for faculties and for the clean and healthy masses of the students to keep athletics honest and rightly related to a sane university life. The offenders are not numerous, but they are very active and noisy. Let us frankly concede that these evils started in good intentions, or in laxities, fostered by the desire to win, excused by the belief that our neighbors were doing worse things. They grew by what they fed on. Abandoned by some when they realized the real tendency of the evils, the corruption has become increasingly difficult to ferret out, and for that very reason has become increasingly corrosive in its effect upon the ideals of impressionable young men, a menace to upright character, a danger to the career of men who are to go out as leaders in the world of business and of public service. Tammany Hall methods have no legitimate place in the education of college men. They are certain to bear a bad harvest in later years.

I am not describing conditions peculiar to one college. In different ways, and in different degrees, the evils are common to the whole system.

There has never been an intention on the part of the faculty to take a final decision without affording time for the expression of student and alumni sentiment. But leadership and final responsibility belong to the faculty. In all the universities the movement for reform was led by those who, from long experience on faculty athletic committees, are most intimately in touch with the situation. It is a striking and significant fact that the old friends of football and the most experienced members of the faculties are clearest in stating the existing evils and in insisting that if the game is to continue changes are imperative.

This is part of an address given 80 years ago to alumni of the University of Wisconsin by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner and is excerpted from Ronald H. Carpenter's "The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner" (Huntington Library, 1983).