

## THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

### ATHLETICS

# 80 Years Ago, a Football Powerhouse Ditched the Sport as a 'Crass' Distraction. Why Haven't More Colleges Followed Suit?

By *Will Jarvis* | SEPTEMBER 17, 2019

✓ PREMIUM



Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Daily News collection,  
Chicago History Museum, Getty Images

The U. of Chicago football team stands around its coach, Amos Alonzo Stagg, on a campus athletics field in 1916. Twenty-three years later, the university dropped the sport.

The college president appeared before a faculty board with an unconventional recommendation. His university, a onetime football powerhouse in the mold of Notre Dame, should eliminate the sport altogether.

Too much money was flowing in, too much emphasis given to a venture far removed from academics. College football, he had previously argued in an essay, was nothing more than “crass professionalism.”

“But nobody has done anything about it,” he wrote. “Why? I think it is because nobody wants to.”

That president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, wanted to — and he did. Eighty years ago this year, the University of Chicago approved Hutchins’s recommendation to drop football, and though the university brought back the sport 30 years later, it was at a lower division: no athletics scholarships, no overemphasis, no huge scandals.



## The Almanac of Higher Education, 2019

\$49.00

Print



ADD TO CART

As Robin Lester writes in *Stagg's University*, a history of the University of Chicago football program, the decision made waves immediately. The Chicago Maroons had been the “Monsters of the Midway” before the Chicago Bears ever claimed that title, and the university was a founding member of what would become the Big Ten Conference. It once boasted one of the top coaches in America, Amos Alonzo Stagg. But it had not earned a winning record in a decade.

That its president would decide to cut the sport spoke volumes. The University of Arkansas's president at the time, J. William Fulbright, later a prominent U.S. senator, commended the “courageous defense of the university and its true function.”

Hutchins's decision resembles the sort of principled stand many faculty members pine for today. And yet in the last 80 years, few colleges, with the exception of a handful of urban Roman Catholic institutions, have followed suit. As Lester points out, few could afford to.

Football's incentives — reputational, financial, political — are complex and ever-growing. The game has such a powerful hold on universities and their stakeholders that when institutions have tried to de-emphasize it, their efforts have often ended up on the rocks.

In 2016 a university president in Idaho tried putting the same idea into practice. He cited Hutchins as an inspiration, noting that, while “success on the football field should complement the prestige and relevance of our academic institution ... football affiliation or performance should not define prestige and relevance.”

What ensued showed just how much had changed since 1939, and how much our obsession with gridiron glory has stayed the same.

### **An Athletics-First Sentiment**

Three months before Hutchins decided the future of football at Chicago, a historic event for the sport took place more than 700 miles away. When the football teams from Fordham and Waynesburg Universities met at New York City's Triborough Stadium, on September 30, 1939, NBC broadcast the action live. It was the world's first televised football game.

Within decades, the games would be broadcast nationally, creating fans of a team — and its college — across the country. Football became a plausible path to institutional fame, and an athletics-first sentiment was common at large state universities in the mid-20th century, said John R. Thelin, a University of Kentucky professor and author of *A History of American Higher Education*.

Consider the case of George L. Cross, a president of the University of Oklahoma who in the early 1950s went to the state Legislature to defend a request for more funding. Years earlier, the Board of Regents suggested Cross sharpen his focus on football and build a

program of which the state could be proud. By the time he approached the lawmakers, Cross's Sooners had won a national championship. After he spent an hour outlining his plan, a state senator said: "Yes, that's all well and good. But what kind of football team are we going to have this year?"

Cross's reply would circulate in newspapers around the nation: "We want to build a university our football team can be proud of."

Building a football program has long been a strategy to improve an entire university. Success on the field can elevate regional universities to national ones (see: Boise State University), and college officials have long cited the game as a way to increase applications, state funding, alumni donations, and prestige.

Research shows that universities with sustained athletics success, especially private institutions, reap financial benefits. One researcher at the Harvard Business School found that when an institution's football team "goes from being mediocre to being great," applications increase by about 18 percent. But that surge rarely lasts. Within a couple of years, applications drop to baseline levels.

Meanwhile, spending on athletics facilities and coaching salaries has boomed. Division I football coaches consistently clear the million-dollar mark in annual pay; this past spring, Dabo Swinney, the head coach at Clemson University, signed a 10-year, \$92-million contract, the largest in college-football history. Clemson's athletics director lauded him for bringing "value, exposure, and unprecedented levels of success not only to our athletics program but to the entire university."

Institutions know they can sell "jock capitalism," said Richard M. Southall, director of the College Sport Research Institute at the University of South Carolina at Columbia. "Colleges and universities view students as consumers who purchase a collegiate experience," he said. "And part of that collegiate experience is college sports. It's the mega-event — the big-time football game, the big-time basketball game."

That sentiment has cemented itself into American college culture, and for those in the biggest conferences, the millions flowing into athletics budgets from television and apparel contracts only creates a positive feedback loop. A conference-specific television network begets advertisers, leading to more revenue, bigger institutional payouts, more competitive coaching salaries, and often winning teams.

But those institutions not in the coterie of powerhouse conferences rarely see a financial windfall. While most Power Five athletics budgets come almost entirely from donations and self-sustained revenues, many smaller colleges rely on institutional support and cash flow from student fees.

### **A Swift and Damning Outcry**

Such financial disparities were causing concern in Moscow, Idaho, by early 2016. The University of Idaho had recently been dropped from the Sun Belt Conference, in college football's top subdivision, and Chuck A. Staben, then Idaho's president, faced a tough decision: Play an independent schedule in the Football Bowl Subdivision, or be the first university ever to drop down to the Football Championship Subdivision — sending a message of football de-emphasis others might follow.

Like Chicago in the 1930s, the Vandals did not boast a thriving football program. Their record in the three previous years was 6-29; in 20 years of FBS competition, Idaho had played in just two bowl games. And unlike Boise State University, the in-state rival, the University of Idaho was known more for its land-grant status than football supremacy: “The University of Idaho chooses very consciously, as the University of Chicago chose so long ago, an appropriate place for its athletic programs,” Staben wrote.

Under his calculations, Staben figured that staying in the FBS or dropping to the FCS would be “roughly cost-neutral.”

Stability was another matter. With an independent schedule, the Vandals would have no natural conference rival. They would have to balance a schedule of paying teams to come to Moscow and getting paid to visit Power Five heavyweights looking for cream-puff opponents. To compete for prospects, Idaho would have to build bigger, nicer facilities,

with the hope of being invited to join a conference like the Mountain West — a long shot in Staben's estimation. The average FBS program in 2016 spent more than \$16 million on football; the Vandals spent less than half that.

Idaho was already a member of the FCS's Big Sky Conference in its other sports. Add football, and the university would get full voting rights in the conference. On April 28 of that year, Staben announced the decision to move to the Big Sky and out of FBS competition.



Geoff Crimmins, The Moscow-Pullman Daily News via AP

The U. of Idaho's president, Chuck Staben (center), answers questions during a news conference in 2016 after announcing that the university would de-emphasize football by leaving the sport's top competitive level.

The outcry was swift and damning. A @FireChuckStaben account emerged on Twitter, and among die-hard Vandals fans #FireStaben became a rallying cry. Staben says his car was vandalized, as was his wife's. His home address was published on a fan website. Fanatics sent death threats, which he didn't take too seriously until he and his wife were out of town while his daughter stayed home alone.

One newspaper's editorial criticized the president as not understanding that there are winners and losers, and that "the key to the perception that a university is

exceptional and successful is whether it has a winning football (and, to a somewhat lesser degree, a winning basketball) program." It was exactly the sentiment Hutchins warned of in 1939.

Meanwhile, officials at the Vandal Scholarship Fund, Idaho athletics' main fund-raising arm, were irate. In May 2018 the group sent a letter to the university's governing board calling for new leadership. Staben, the VSF wrote, was an "abrasive," "anti-athletic establishment president" who "never had a real plan for funding athletics" and had

sought to intentionally damage Idaho's athletics programs. Athletics ran a deficit following the FCS move, and VSF funding dropped by more than \$500,000. Later that month the board announced Staben's contract would not be renewed.

Staben thinks the football move played a role in his departure, though other controversies, including the athletics department's handling of alleged sexual assaults by players, also caused tumult in his tenure. If he could replay the 2016 decision, he says, he would have been more intentional in his communication, but even the act of speaking about football de-emphasis is fraught. "Most presidents," said B. David Ridpath, an associate professor of sports administration at Ohio University, "hold on for dear life and just hope that athletics doesn't take them down."

Hutchins lasted another dozen years at Chicago, despite criticism of him by local newspapers' sports sections and by alumni who vowed never to send their children to Chicago. (One furious fan said the president's decision would "sincerely flatter both Stalin and Hitler.")

Similarly, when the University of the Pacific, where Stagg coached in the 1930s and '40s, cut football, in 1995, fans cried and boosters vowed never to donate again (they did). At Marquette University, where football was dropped in 1960 to save money, some 3,000 students took to the streets, chanting "We want football! We want justice!"

"All it takes is one booster," said Fritz Polite, an assistant dean at Shenandoah University and a past president of the Drake Group, which is dedicated to furthering the integrity of academics in college athletics. "You're trying to build a \$50-million business school? Well, that donor sits up in that skybox every game. To say you don't want the \$50 million — you know, it's hard to say no to \$50 million."

This billion-dollar industry, complete with millionaire coaches and facilities arms races, is the university's front door, a moneymaker and reputation-builder. Staben said it's difficult, as a president, to speak candidly about concerns over the game, which faces a litany of problems, including the looming concern of players' brain injuries and chronic traumatic encephalopathy, which have spawned hundreds of lawsuits against the NCAA

and its member institutions. Meanwhile, athletes are demanding fair compensation. Youth participation in the sport is plummeting. He wonders about football's long-term outlook.

De-emphasis is a healthy step, Staben said. But when asked whether other presidents should make a move like the one he took at Idaho, he offered an unconventional recommendation.

"I think," he said, "they should seriously consider eliminating football."

*Will Jarvis was an editorial intern at The Chronicle. Follow him on Twitter @willyfrederick.*

© 2019 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037