



BUILDING A SPOR

David Woods

THEY DIDN'T CALL HIM "HURRY UP" FOR NOTHING. When Fielding Yost got off the train in Ann Arbor in the fall of 1901, legend has it he grabbed his bags and ran up the hill to the campus. Yost had been hired to return the University of Michigan football team to prominence, and he had no patience for "rebuilding years."

The day he arrived in Ann Arbor, Yost arrogantly predicted, "Michigan isn't going to lose a game." From 1901 through 1905, the Wolverines racked up fifty-five wins against just one loss and one tie, out-scoring opponents by a total of 2,821 to 42 points. Those famous "Point-A-Minute" teams launched his twenty-four-season Michigan coaching career, which he closed out with a record of 165-29-10. Only Bo Schembechler ever topped that mark at Michigan—over sixty years later.

Yost's standing as one of the all-time great football men was already secure when he stopped coaching in the 1920s, but his run as athletic director from 1921 to 1941 guaranteed his legacy. The foundation for Michigan athletics was built by Yost with such foresight it remains the greatest college sports empire in the country.



SPORTS EMPIRE



Today, a large maize-and-blue scoreboard (above) rises above the University of Michigan's football stadium. Fielding Yost (right) who served as U-M's football coach (1901-1921) and athletic director (1921-1941) orchestrated the stadium's construction.

by John U. Bacon

We've got the first field house ever built on a campus," former athletic director Don Canham says. "We've got the first intramural building. We've got the largest stadium in the country. That was no accident. That was Fielding Yost."

For better or worse, everything about Yost was larger than life. His ego was as big as the field house that bears his name. When Yost applied for the Michigan job, he sent a collection of his clippings and reference letters that weighed more than fifty pounds—even though Michigan was courting *him*. Yost was forgiven his excesses because he had that uncanny knack of balancing each vice with an equally strong virtue.

Yost's ego was almost superhuman, but so was his charm; his ambition was grand, but so was his vision; his stubbornness was remarkable, but so was his ability to change. His most prominent quality, however, had no counterforce: his love for "Meeshegan," as he pronounced it. That love drove everything Yost did, and half a century after his death, it still inspires U-M athletics.

THE ACCIDENTAL ATHLETE

Yost's early life had little to do with athletics and even less to do with academics. Fielding Harris Yost was born on April 30, 1871, the son of Confederate veteran Parmenus Wesley Yost and his wife, Elzena Jane. He spent most of his youth working on the family farm near Fairview, West Virginia, but he was a voracious reader, a quick learner and a dogged worker. Fielding liked to play up his rural background, but this "hayseed" managed to earn a law degree, run four companies at one time and write a popular three hundred-page treatise on football—all on the side.

Yost's legal education gave him something more important than a law degree: a chance to play organized football. A good-looking guy with tousled hair, broad grin and bright eyes, Yost

stood six feet tall and weighed two hundred pounds, making him one of the biggest players of his generation. Smart, quick and tenacious, he played guard and tackle so well that Park "Dink" Davis, the young Lafayette College coach, convinced him to "transfer" midway through the 1896 season from West Virginia to Davis's Pennsylvania school.

Although Yost later claimed he made the switch to try his hand at engineering, as luck would have it his transfer just happened to fall on the same week as Lafayette's game against the University of Pennsylvania. Penn had a thirty-six-game winning streak going into that game—and a one-game losing streak after it. A few days later, Yost suddenly concluded that engineering didn't suit him after all, and he returned to West Virginia.

When explaining this apparent sleight of hand years later, Yost said he left Lafayette's school of engineering because he discovered engineering involved "too much messing around with figures." This was an interesting comment from a man who, at the time he said it, was successfully running two banks and closely supervising the engineering of Yost Field House, Michigan Stadium and the Intramural Building. The claim has to be considered one of the better whoppers of Yost's career.

At age twenty-six, with his University of West Virginia degree in his pocket, coaching football—not practicing law—had captured his imagination. But in 1897 full-time college football coaches were almost unheard of, in part because teams didn't make enough money to cover their expenses. For the next five years Yost would repeat the same routine: take a new job, beat the school's main rival, win its league championship, receive glowing reviews, and move on—from Ohio Wesleyan to Nebraska to Kansas to Stanford.

Stanford loved Yost but decided after the 1900 season to hire only alumni coaches, a common policy at the time. In December 1900 Yost wrote to Illinois to see if there were any openings. They didn't, but the manager of athletics passed Yost's letter on to his counterpart at Michigan, Charles Baird.

Because the Wolverines had lost to arch-rival Chicago and finished fifth in the conference the previous season, Baird eagerly offered Yost free room and board, plus a \$2,300 salary. The same amount a full professor received—to work just three months a year. Yost had finally found a way to coach football for a living. Without realizing it, Yost also had found his final home.



Yost (center) posed with his Michigan team in 1904. Even though he had been with the school for only three years, he had yet to lose a game.

Football was always on Yost's mind. Even while attending a dinner in Chicago, the Michigan coach uses a napkin to sketch a play for an intrigued companion (right).



CLEAN OR DIRTY?

Yost combined obsessive preparation—he popularized pre-season conditioning (out at Whitmore Lake) and the “chalk-talk”—with eye-popping innovation. He invented the no-huddle offense, the linebacker and the fake kick, all used to this day. But Yost knew that hard work and smarts don’t count for much if you don’t have the players to use them. Yost made certain he had the players right from the start.

Of course, Yost’s ability to attract dominant players invariably led to rumors that he was skirting recruitment rules. Although Yost might have slipped a few players past the eligibility norms, his early reputation for cutting corners is overstated. Most of his players performed well in the classroom before grade inflation and the physical education department made things easier for athletes. “He didn’t have any dummies on those teams,” says former player Kip Taylor, who scored the first touchdown in Michigan Stadium. “Everybody had a goal. They had a plan, and went to Michigan because they loved the University.”

Although it’s probably true that Yost didn’t follow the few off-field guidelines that then existed, neither did a lot of his critics. The whole question of Yost’s early record on ethics needs perspective. As Canham says, “People try to judge Yost in the period in which we’re now living, but that was 90 years ago. You have to put it in the proper time frame.”

Coaches didn’t have many rules to follow back then—they were considered guidelines more than edicts—and there weren’t many coaches to follow them, anyway, since most teams were still run by alumni volunteers or glorified trainers. The Big Ten (then called the Western Conference) didn’t get serious about making rules stick until after the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s birth in 1905. College football in Yost’s early years would be on a par with club sports today.

To give some idea of the informality of the game back then, Michigan played Ann Arbor High School as late as 1891, just ten years before Yost arrived. (The Wolverines beat the local teenagers, 62-0.) Another example: in 1897, when Yost’s Oberlin team played Michigan, Oberlin only had ten players, so Michigan allowed Yost himself to suit up and play. College football at the turn of the century had a sort of Wild West, “anything goes” feel to it—not the kind of atmosphere that could expect strict adherence to the rules.

When the rules became more rigid by the 1920s, however, to Yost’s credit he changed with the times. When he stepped down from coaching for good after the 1926 season, Yost was considered one of the foremost proponents of strict academic and eligibility guidelines.

POPULARITY CONTEST

The simple fact is, other coaches, like Chicago’s Amos Alonzo Stagg and Pittsburgh’s Walter Camp, were doing the same things Yost was doing—and often far more—but they just weren’t doing them as successfully.

Michigan brought Yost in for a purpose—they wanted to win games, win Big Ten titles and beat Chicago. By 1905, Yost had achieved all that and more. He won fifty-five of fifty-seven games, four straight Big Ten titles, and four out of five games against Chicago, by a 93-12 margin. (The fifth game, a 2-0 loss, cost Michigan its fifty-six game unbeaten streak and their string of Big Ten titles.)

Given such incredible success, you’d think Yost would have been universally popular. Among students and alumni he certainly was, but he was equally unpopular among many faculty members.

For starters, many academicians were suspicious of football itself, since it had been an unruly, unstructured game from its inception. The faculty also recoiled at the salary Yost received and were positively galled that he was allowed to skip town forty-two weeks a year to tend to his lucrative businesses in West Virginia and Tennessee.

Yost didn’t help matters with his conspicuously high profile. When Ann Arbor was still a small, walking town of two-story brick buildings where everybody knew everybody, Yost spent his free time going from shop to shop talking up his team. Someone once asked legendary sports writer Ring Lardner if he ever talked to Yost. “No,” Lardner replied, “My father taught me to never interrupt.” His reputation, for better or worse, grew quickly.

COUNTER-FORCES

Since Yost lived in an era in which modesty and moderation were the rule, it’s remarkable that people usually excused Yost’s extravagant behavior. The reason: for every Yost excess, he had a virtue to offset it.

If Yost thought highly of himself, he generally thought highly of those around him, too—perhaps concluding that they had greatness by association. Late in Yost's life he bought an expensive birdbath made of Italian marble for his home on Stratford, right off Avon. When a neighborhood boy etched his own initials on the side of it, Yost summoned him. He took the boy back to the birdbath, pointed to the letters and asked, "Did you do this?" The young boy didn't dare deny it. "Well, do you know what this means?" Yost asked, pointing to the boy's initials. The boy quivered, wide-eyed. "It means" Yost said, "now you're going to have to become a very important man, so I can be proud of this."

Yost promoted the University of Michigan and his team almost as feverishly as he did himself.

He liked to ask, with his cocksure grin, "Who are they that they should beat a Meeshegan team?" He asked the rhetorical question so often, it became the refrain for a popular song. When Yost pondered a more enduring fight song, "The Victors," he said, "I reckon it's a good thing Louis Elbel was a Meeshegan student when he wrote that song. If he'd been at any other Big Ten school, they wouldn't have had much chance to use it, y'know."

It also helped that Yost and his team looked good compared to the uneducated coaches and brutal brand of football found elsewhere. In 1905 alone, eighteen players died on the football fields around the country and another 159 were seriously injured. No similar casualties occurred at Michigan, partly due to the coach's emphasis on smart football and sportsmanship over thuggery. Though he didn't pretend to follow the loose off-field guidelines when he started at Michigan, on the field his teams followed the rules scrupulously. His former employers at Nebraska and Kansas, respectively, wrote that Yost "teaches only straight-forward, legitimate football," and "he insists on *clean* football."

Yost's best counter to the many critics of football, however, might be his greatest legacy to the game. In an era when football was considered a social ill run by renegade coaches, Yost argued that, when properly coached, football developed valuable qualities in students that the classroom could not. The belief that football builds character has been repeated so often it is now a cliché, but when he first espoused it, it was a fresh idea.

Schembechler often drew on Yost's philosophy when addressing his team. "This is the Yost quote that we used the most," Schembechler says, and then, in his typically animated style, he recites Yost's speech from memory.

"I ask *no man* to make a sacrifice. On the contrary! We ask him to do the *opposite*. To live clean, come clean, think clean. That he stop doing all the things that destroy him physically, mentally and morally, and begin doing all the things that make him *keener, finer* and *more competent*."

"We used this a thousand times," Schembechler says, breaking out of character. "It says it all. You don't sacrifice to play football. When we ask you not to drink, smoke, or carouse—it's not a *sacrifice*, we're just asking you to be doing what you should be doing *anyway*."

THE EMPIRE BUILDER

The minute U-M President Marion Burton named Yost the new athletic director in 1921, he was on a mission to construct the very best athletic complex in the nation, one built to last well into the next millennium. As a coach, Yost's enthusiasm marked his success. As an athletic director, it was his vision that set him apart.

"From 1901 to 1921 Yost did not innovate anywhere but on the field," says Canham. "But for the next twenty years [as athletic director], he was unbelievable."

If Yost's ambitious proposals were subject to university politics, he wouldn't have won many battles, and he probably knew it. To insulate him from clashes with the administrators, Yost used the Faculty Board in Control of Athletics as his foil. If he agreed with someone, he'd say so himself; but if he disagreed, he'd claim the issue was out of his hands because the board had jurisdiction over the matter. Yost somehow neglected to mention that he, in turn, effectively ran the board.

"From Yost to Crisler to me, we had a Faculty Board in Control, and the presidents we served under believed that faculty control was the way to control athletics," Canham says today. "Yost easily controlled the faculty committee. He was the first athletic director who really benefited from having the faculty in control, and without that, he'd never be able to do what he did. Yost had support from the board for the same reason I did: he never took stupid things to them [for approval.]"

Fortunately for Yost, only one president, Alexander Ruthven, served longer than five years "under Yost." Further, since Ruthven knew almost nothing about sports, he wasn't about to challenge the popular, highly knowledgeable Yost. If Yost served under a hard-nosed, involved president, Michigan's athletic campus might look very different today.

"Yost was lucky, very lucky, that he had Alexander Ruthven for a president," Canham says. "Ruthven was a great delegator."

The university presidents stayed out of Yost's way, and the board rubber stamped Yost's grand plans, but it was the athletic department's financial autonomy that fueled his unprecedented building program.

"He fought to keep the money made *by* the athletic department *in* the athletic department, so he had the money to get it done," former player Kip Taylor says. "*That's* how he did it. Otherwise, if the administration had a choice between spending money on a nurse's dorm on the Hill or a stadium, where do you think it's going?"

BRICK BY BRICK

Securing the money for the athletic complex took cunning, but building a sporting nirvana took vision. Within months of taking office Yost started work on his first project, which would be called Yost Field House. Yost's first task was convincing people they needed such a thing.

In 1921 the Michigan athletic complex could hardly be called a complex: it was merely a loose collection of open-aired,

temporary structures. Michigan had 42,000-seat Ferry Field, but no golf course, hockey rink or basketball arena. Michigan didn't have much, but didn't know it needed more until Yost came along.

Yost coined the term "field house," and naturally wanted it named after himself. Problem was, the university had a policy against naming buildings after living people, so Yost did what he always did when he faced resistance: he rounded up the students, the alumni, the board members and sympathetic reporters to make his case for him. As usual, the administration buckled. Since then, the university has broken the "no living legacies" rule for Crisler Arena, Canham Natatorium and Schembechler Hall.

Yost made just one mistake. In 1921 the builders estimated the field house would cost \$225,000, but when finished in 1923 the price had more than doubled to \$563,000. Instead of calling it a failure, however, Yost used the deficit to springboard his next project. He figured the best way to pay off the debt would be to increase football receipts—and the only way to do that was to increase Michigan's seating capacity.

Yost wanted to build a 140,000-seat stadium, but settled for a capacity of 70,000 with 15,000 temporary bleachers and room to expand. The workers installed twenty-two miles of California redwood for the seats and planted a single four-leaf clover for good luck.

As the workers dug down they ran into countless springs. Yost calmly responded, "Don't let that bother you—we can use that water." The workers asked him where they could possibly use all the water, to which Yost said: "For our golf course right across the street!" The workers looked at each other and shook their heads—there *was* no golf course across the street—so Yost built a golf course, which still depends on the stadium springs for much of its water supply.

Workers started building the stadium on September 15, 1926, and hosted the inaugural game just over a year later, on October 1, 1927.

No Place To Hurry To

Yost's final years were sad ones. When law professor Ralph Aigler, head of the Faculty Board in Control, offered Fritz Crisler the coaching job without Yost's knowledge, it became clear that Yost no longer ran the athletic department. Uncharacteristically, Yost did not raise a ruckus; instead, he stepped aside graciously.

When Yost retired in 1941, the university gave him the title of professor emeritus and an office in Yost Field House. He didn't have much to do except answer his correspondence, so he tried to keep busy at home. "The doctors told Yost not to shovel his driveway, so he hired us to do it," remembers Al Gallup, whose best childhood friend lived next door to Yost. "But he was so particular, or restless, that in the process of showing us exactly how he wanted it done, he pretty much shoveled the whole thing off himself."

With little to do and no one to talk to, Yost left his office in



Fielding Yost coined the term "field house" and had U-M's built in 1921. Completed in 1923, bearing the name Yost Field House, the building served as the center for Michigan's athletic program. Today, it is home to the Wolverine hockey program.

the afternoon to go for walks around campus. He often sought out the Sigma Chi fraternity to talk with the boys about Meeshegan football. Sometimes as he wandered around, he became lost and disoriented. The Ann Arbor police often found him; they'd coax him into their car and return him to his home tucked back in the woods by the river.

Yost's wanderings ended on October 20, 1946, at the age of seventy five.

Yost left behind one of the greatest legacies in college football. More than his unequaled records, his innovative plays and his athletic empire, Yost gave college football a measure of respectability it never had before. When Yost began coaching in 1897, many considered football a game of hooligans; when he left the game for good in 1941, after extolling football's moral benefits for almost half a century, far more considered football a showcase of Americans at their best.

Sports writer Grantland Rice once said of Yost: "No other man has ever given as much heart, soul, brains and tongue to the game he loved—football."

At one of the various banquets held for Yost near the end of his life, Yost walked up to the podium to respond to all the tributes his admirers had just given him.

"My heart is so full at this moment, and I am so overcome by the rush of memories," Yost said, "that I fear I could say little more. But do let me reiterate . . . the Spirit of Michigan. It is based upon a deathless loyalty to Michigan and all her ways; an enthusiasm that makes it second nature for Michigan men to spread the gospel of their university to the world's distant outposts; a conviction that nowhere is there a better university, in any way, than this Michigan of ours."

For all Yost's faults, his love of Michigan and all that it could be, had no bounds. ■

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